

Isekai Rebuilding Project: Volume 2

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Prologue

I, Eiji Kazama, died. To my utter embarrassment, my death was the picture-perfect depiction of dumbassery brought to life by CGI. Poisoned to death at the Azur castle I had walked right into with all of my guards down. My task of restoring a world screwed up by the knowledge of a hero (after he had saved it by defeating the Demon Lord) came to a halt less than a month in.

My story should have ended then and there, since my contract was for one lifetime. Once I'm dead, I'm done. But I couldn't accept that. After I found out that my partner, Tiamat, was my fiancée, and that the hero who brought about the slow and steady destruction to the world was her brother, who had killed himself...

Come to think of it, Tiamat not telling me the hero's name, despite her knowing everything, must have been an attempt to hide those facts from me. Even if I was to find out eventually, she'd wanted that to happen later rather than sooner. My fiancée had her way with words. Per her intentions, I wasn't very interested in the hero's name or his bloodline until my last moments. I think Tiamat was conflicted, or troubled, over getting me caught up in her matters. And she was the type to never tell me when she was troubled. I told her over and over again that what troubles her, troubles me; she would always worry about me instead. Some fiancé I was.

But, now that I knew what I did, I couldn't back down. That's why I pleaded with the Inspector to be given one more chance. It was the one trick up her sleeve. There was no next time. Die again, and my job would really be finished. No more room for stupid mistakes. To say that I had unyielding resolve might be painting myself in too good of a light.

"Wait for me. I won't let you carry that weight alone."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

A voice slid into my ears. It belonged to Tiamat, standing behind me. My vision began to light up. In front of me sat a middle-aged man without an expression. Viscount Zahreed, as I recalled. He was the royal messenger. My mind and memories became clearer. It seemed that this was where I would pick up.

"Nothing, Tia."

Turning my head back to her, I answered my partner. While there was so much I wanted to talk to her about, there was the matter at

hand to deal with first.

“Our King, His Majesty, has a few questions to ask you.”

After clearing his throat, Viscount Zahreed made his declaration. I remembered those words from before.

“So, you want us to come to the castle?” I asked.

In the same way as before, I remember.

“Indeed.”

His response, again, was as I recalled it. Here’s where I agreed, walked right into the castle, and ended up killed. How stupid was I? Giving them the home field advantage this early in the game? As a bureaucrat, or just as an adult, I should have picked up on the common tactic of the powerful.

“That doesn’t sound right, Mister Messenger. If he wants something from us, he should come to us.”

That’s why I chose a different path.

“Wha—?!”

The messenger flapped his jaw like a goldfish out of water. That seemed about right. He must not have expected rejection, or even a little bit of resistance. No one was more powerful than the King in his own kingdom, right? It would take some serious guts to refuse his summons. Of course, I had an excuse ready. I didn’t die for nothing.

“While a king coming to see a commoner may seem strange to you, I am not a citizen of your country. Furthermore, a human summoning Hermits would break etiquette.”

This was also a show of my resolve. Until this point, either from embarrassment or for fear of acting superior, I had rarely called myself a Hermit. Now, I didn’t have that luxury. I’m going to use that title and every privilege that comes with it.

“You do have a point there. Viscount Zahreed. If the king wishes to see us, we are willing to oblige. But only if it’s done right. Otherwise, your country’s reputation may suffer.”

Tiamat gave me a glance and a smile, being the perfect partner again, flawlessly picking up what I put down. But...

That’s my fiancée?

I couldn’t help but wonder if she could turn herself back into human form. I didn’t fall in love with just her looks though. I swear.

“...Very well. I will report to His Majesty the full extent of your resolve.”

With that, the messenger stood up.

Do-Over!

1.

After sending the messenger back, I invited Tiamat for a stroll. We walked, heading for a little hill that overlooked the town.

“You’re inviting me to go outside... What’s the occasion?”

“I wanted to apologize.”

“Did you do something that warrants an apology, Eiji?”

A natural question. I prepared myself with a short inhale.

“I called your brother a piece of shit, several times.”

“...You knew?” Tiamat said, after a moment of silence long enough for light to travel three million kilometers. She looked at me.

“I realized after I died. I’m surprised at how incompetent I was.”

In summary, I explained my story so far. My partner listened to me, nodding along.

“I’m surprised the Inspector had such a trick up his sleeve.”

“His?”

“That’s the kind of existence it is. It’ll appear as a man or a woman, according to your mindset. Didn’t he explain that to you?”

“Right... I remember something like that...”

Something about shaping herself after what was in my mind. In short, I figured that she appeared in a form we can understand. If she had appeared to me in a form reminiscent of Nyarlathotep, my Sanity would have hit zero in the blink of an eye.

“I don’t know about that comparison. Who are you trying to appeal to with your Call of Cthulhu reference?”

Sorry, I couldn’t help it.

“By the way, why do you look like that?”

“If I was going into a fantasy world, I wanted to play something non-human.”

That’s it?! That’s why you’re a dragon?!

Nonhuman is a wide spectrum, too. She could have been an elegant elf with gold locks and blue eyes, or a glamorous she-demon, or a cute little hobbit... Not even a Dragonborn, but she had to be a straight-up dragon. That was a little too kinky for me!

“And you’d sleep with that elf, right? Without realizing she was your fiancée.”

“N-N-N-N-Never! I’m a f-f-f-f-faithful man!”

“That’s something you should say without avoiding eye contact.”

Tiamat cackled boisterously. While I remembered my fiancée to be a woman full of humor, she was never this eccentric. What happened?

“Besides, I would have too much resemblance to Shizuru if I looked like my human self. Although the people alive today are generations after him, I didn’t want anyone to see the connection,” she added in a rather serious tone.

Someone who doesn’t know her might think that this was the real reason, but I wasn’t about to fall for that trick. Without a doubt, and with all sincerity, the first reason she gave was her real reason for her decision. Tacking on some legitimate-sounding reason to manipulate my psyche was one of her usual tactics. She was a master of conversation; she didn’t make a living as a student counselor for giggles.

“Can you return to your human self, by the way?” I changed the subject.

Even if the real reason was the one she added on, or even if she had some other reason, no matter how dire that reason was, she would crack jokes with all of her might. She would risk her life for a laugh. That’s the kind of woman she was, never letting anyone see her in pain. I knew that well, and that was why I wanted to support her. That much has never changed.

“No. More accurately, this is my form in this world. I could use a transformation spell to take a human form, but that would only be a disguise.”

“So, you can...”

I would have preferred that, if it could be done.

“I can.”

As soon as she confirmed it, her appearance changed with a puff of smoke... to a middle-aged man with rippling muscles like Conan the Barbarian.

“Why did you turn into a man?!”

“It’s a transformation spell. I can be whoever I want to be.”

The man laughed, as he twitched his pecs up and down. Yep. Not exactly what I was hoping for.

“...Dragon, please...”

“Mm-hm.”

She returned to her old form with another poof. Oh, how nice it was to recognize her again. Dang it.

“We may have scared off the messenger, but danger is still afoot,” Tiamat said, looking down on the city from the little hill.

In the far distance, we could see the castle. That’s where I was killed.

“Right. We just dodged the first bullet.”

Follow that messenger, and I would have been killed. We simply avoided that. Now that we’d sent away the messenger, they would soon be moving on to their next move. It was difficult to predict, at this point, whether they would try to get rid of us diplomatically or by force. I didn’t get the script for what was about to happen. A re-do was a re-do, but I didn’t really gain any edge from it.

“Hm. I did warn Baze and Hieronymus about it using Thought Speech. They won’t fall for a sudden attack.”

“Magic’s pretty handy, isn’t it?”

“Too bad you can’t use it.”

“You’re a Dosanko too, Tia.”

“My body belongs to this world. And, I’m a dragon. The most powerful species alive.”

“Dammit! Dammit!”

I have nothing, and my fiancée is loaded head to toe with cheat codes. It wasn’t fair. Could I not have gotten something? I wasn’t asking for laser eyes or anything.

“That being said, they shouldn’t be coming at us with blunt force.”

“Why do you think so?”

“All of your friends, including me, are strong, Eiji. If we clash head-on, Azur would be left with considerable damage, too.”

“Guess you’re right.”

I could definitely agree with that. That’s why they had poisoned me, to cut off the head of the group to eliminate structure from our party.

“A long con, then? Like talking crap about what we’re doing.”

“Seems feasible.”

They could ban or prosecute the edamame, gagd meat, and beet sugar as the devil’s food or something. Even on Earth, this was a tactic in the playbook of religious groups. In modern Japan, health products with no science to their merit are promoted on TV all the time. Even when distributors are prosecuted, the media that promoted the product get away scot-free. Just a testament against wholeheartedly believing any information you hear on TV, or on the internet. Any words spoken without liability is worth no more than a rumor.

“That being said, rumors can be a powerful force. No sense looking for proof or liability in them.”

“Right. It’s not something anyone could handle alone,” I agreed.

“And, what is your plan if the throne employs those tactics?”

“There is no plan. We turn away and run.”

“Oh?”

“The Inspector told me...”

I relayed to Tia that there are many people suffering from beriberi

in the neighboring kingdom of Noura too. In fact, I figured that the disease had spread throughout the entire continent.

“Well, most of the continent is not occupied by humans.”

The area that was occupied, apparently, was only a little bit larger than Hokkaido. We were in a medieval world, after all. The area in question was nowhere near as vast as a continent on Earth. On the flip side, that was probably why rice farming spread so quickly. Without a civilized method of communication, it was natural that the affected area was limited.

In any case, only saving the kingdom of Azur was pointless. Our endeavors were far from successful if we couldn’t spread our cure to all of the areas where people mostly ate white rice and not much else.

“That’s why... I thought we could go on a trip.”

“The world tour of saving the world.”

“It’s nothing to get hyped up about. But if there are countries where we can get close to the center of the government, we could gain a lot more reach.”

In Azur, we couldn’t even do that. It was stressful to have a target on your head, and to be honest, being killed once had kind of traumatized me. Even if it was by the descendant of my fiancée’s brother. How could I be chummy with someone who held malicious, or even murderous, intentions towards me? Sorry, but I wasn’t that noble. I had no desire to approach the royalty of Azur anymore. Of course, if they were to approach us, I was willing to hear them out.

“Chicken.”

“But when I was killed, oh boy, did you lose it. It was adorable.” I grinned.

“Shut up.”

The dragon’s tail swished around and forcefully spanked my butt.

2.

The edamame buyouts had begun. The Azur government had pressured the producers to limit the plant’s flow into the market. The same thing had happened in Japan, when the government bought up all the rice they could before setting their price and putting it on the market. The intention was to keep the producers from overpricing their people’s main source of food.

“That’s just plain dumb.”

That was my partner’s opinion, and I agreed. A ubiquitous food, like rice, was one thing. The people would buy it regardless. But edamame wasn’t that. It was far from becoming a staple, and we were still in experimental stages when it came to recipes. That’s why we had to draw people’s attention through the sweetness of the Zunda

mochi. Even if the government ordered the people to eat it, they wouldn't know what to do with it without knowing how to cook it. Edamame was livestock feed in the first place.

If things would resolve by some governmental force-feeding, we would have never needed to explore alternatives like edamame or gagd. All the king had to do was to tell his people to eat brown rice. Tokugawa Yoshimune (who massively improved the country during the Edo period) ate brown rice himself, as well as promoted it to his men and commoners alike. Still, most people in the city continued to eat white rice. That's about how well these things go.

Even a modern man like myself can understand the pushback against any government power dictating what to eat. What's worse, since there was no way of watching the people eat the foods shoved down their throats by the government, they were most likely just discarded.

"This may be the worst move they could make."

Mister Milon chuckled. Since we had no way of obtaining edamame, we had halted the sales of Zunda mochi, too. Just selling the beet sugar would only wreck the market. This would not have been a laughing matter for us if it wasn't for one reason: we had already developed a substitute prescription for beriberi, and it was ready to go on the shelves.

Ten days had passed since we sent back the royal messenger, and Tiamat and I had done a little more than just goofing around during that time. The next weapon in our arsenal was potato croquette. Potatoes grew most anywhere, but because of the minor toxin in their eyes, historically it took a while for them to become popularized. Also, continuously growing potatoes apparently weakened the soil. In recent history, the population of Europe practically depended on its yield of potatoes. It was a little too risky to make it our main weapon.

So we decided to sell something pre-processed. We had rye, so we could make panko, and while they weren't exactly chickens, there was a similar livestock from which we could gather eggs. In addition, we would stuff the croquette with ground gagd meat. We would be able to counter the king's move. Although, considering the issue of preservation, we also wanted a refrigerator. So that's exactly what we were making while waiting for the kingdom's response.

The idea, of course, came from Tiamat. Her trivia came in handy yet again. There is a type of refrigerator that doesn't require electricity or ice: a zeer, or pot-in-pot cooler. Its usage dates back millennia, but it had only recently been scientifically analyzed and used in modern technology. The only things needed to make one are a pair of pots in different sizes, along with dirt and water. Construction is simple. Put the small pot in the big pot, fill in the gap with dirt, and soak the dirt

with plenty of water. That's it. Though there would have to be a wet cloth or something draped over it to keep dust out, I would say this is still an extremely simple contraption.

While you might wonder if its contents would really cool, the inside of that small pot becomes spectacularly cold. The trick of it is in a process called evaporative cooling, where evaporating water takes a lot of heat with it. In Japan, for example, this process is used during the summer through hosing down the street or outside your front door.

The contraption would be less effective in places with high moisture in the air like Tokyo, but the climate of this region was similar to that of Hokkaido. Dry summers. If used in a dry, breezy location, the zeer's internal temperature can drop to about 4 degrees Celsius. In fact, this is apparently used in rural Africa, where they don't have electricity, to enable the storing of vaccines, saving many lives in the process. Of course, that allows for preserving fresh foods at the same time.

"The wisdom of Hermits never ceases to amaze me."

Mister Milon laughed as he took out a tomato-ish food from the zeer. Taking a bite from a cold, fresh vegetable in the middle of summer must have been a great luxury here. On second thought, vegetables and fruits could have also been kept submerged in a well.

"It was Tia's idea. Nothing like this could come from my knowledge." I shrugged.

"As humble as ever," Mister Milon replied.

Nope. Just honest.

"In any case, let's start selling the croquettes tonight."

"I've been waiting to hear you say that, Sir Eiji."

We had been waiting for the right time, when the king would make his move. Tiamat and I had actually guessed that there would be a ban on edamame, especially since we were calling them Hermit Beans of all things. Seeing that they moved to monopolize rather than illegalize...

"They know how badly Azur is affected," Tiamat said, munching on another tomato-like thing. She could have at least taken off the stem, though. Wow, did she eat anything.

"Beriberi is most common among young, active, otherwise healthy people."

Soldiers, for example. During the Russo-Japanese War at the beginning of the twentieth century, more deployed soldiers died of beriberi than were killed in combat. It was easy to imagine that the Azur military was in a similar condition.

"Mm-hm. Azur can't afford to go to war at the moment. Even if they consider us a threat, they wouldn't send their army here."

“That’s where those covert teams came in, though.”

During the past ten days, we were attacked by an assassination unit on three separate occasions... apparently. I never saw any of them. Hieronymus, Baze, and Syfer’s parties had each defeated a team. Losing to a Cait Sith and a Fenrir was one thing, but I didn’t know what to make of the official military losing to a private adventurer team, even an A-rank one.

“We could take on swarms of those cowards.”

Syfer came out from within the manor, having overheard our conversation. He had a bandana on his head and an apron around his neck. As I recalled, he was hired as my bodyguard, not a chef. I must have been mistaken.

I didn’t ask him why he trained in the kitchen day after day though, because I already knew the answer. He was improving his cooking for the sake of his younger brothers and was helping in the kitchen for leftover food. I had enough heart to condone that much. Besides, Syfer having enough time to work in the kitchen was one indicator of how weak Azur’s military was.

“They were that bad?”

“Wobbling all over the place. They tripped over nothing, dropped their weapons... They were bad enough that we were able to chase them away alive.”

“Ah...”

Textbook beriberi. Their limbs were no longer listening to their brains.

The hard-training soldiers would mostly be eating white rice. Since they had all the calories, they would appear healthy at a glance; underneath their skin, though, their bodies were crumbling. There was only so much lethargy they could overcome with their willpower. On the other hand, Syfer’s party was completely healthy, physically and mentally, with Baze and Hieronymus behind them. Of course, there was no reason for them to lose.

“I’m starting to feel sorry for the royal army.” I shrugged.

3.

As expected, the potato croquette was a hit. It could be served as a legitimate side dish too. And its nutritional value was on par with edamame.

“But it doesn’t take long to get sick of croquettes.”

Croquettes today, croquettes tomorrow... There was a song like that that came out in the Showa period.

“Originally from the Taisho period. The one you’ve heard of is a remake.”

There went her trivia again. As soon as I gave one little fun-fact, she pounced on it.

“While it was a high-class western food at the time, you would get sick of it eating it every day. A satire.”

“What, really?”

Wasn’t it about a housewife who couldn’t cook anything else thanking her husband for happily eating the croquettes day after day?

“The connotation changed when it was remade. By the late 1950s it wasn’t expensive or high-class anymore.”

“I see...”

Culinary history is our history. Still, Tiamat hit the nail on the head. The croquettes, now fresh and popular, would soon become mundane. We weren’t nearing an actual solution unless we popularized the habit of eating a balanced meal. Pork would make things a lot easier, but alas.

“No sense wishing for the impossible. I just had an idea though. How about a dish using rice bran?”

Well, we wouldn’t struggle for supplies. So much is produced as a byproduct of rice refinement. But what could we make from rice bran...?

Oh.

“Pickled vegetables?”

“Mm-hm. Bran pickling, wasn’t it called?”

It was. And rice bran contains plenty of vitamin B1, which meant that bran pickled foods could yield a good amount of it too. Unfortunately, I didn’t know how much that amount was.

“I think so. Don’t know much about it, though.”

“Can’t be helped. I don’t eat pickled things either.”

Like Tiamat said, it couldn’t be helped. Pickles and vinegar-y things weren’t really my cup of tea. Naturally, I didn’t know how to make any, as well as their nutritional contents. I doubted we could just shove vegetables in a pile of rice bran.

Tiamat, or my fiancée, didn’t like pickled vegetables either. Nor did she like natto. Of course, she had her trivia databank, so she should have known how to make it.

How do I put this... We didn’t really feel like making something we didn’t like. Please understand. We would’ve had to taste it ourselves and advertise how good it was.

“Perhaps we can teach them the method as a means of preserving food.”

Even Tiamat backed out. The hungry-hungry-dragon was being a little chicken.

“Besides, we won’t be staying in this country for long.”

“True.”

A week had passed since we started selling croquettes. It was about time the king made his next move. The buyouts of edamame didn't yield the results they expected, and our dishes still continued to save people. The kingdom's reputation fell as the Hermits' reputation rose. I doubted that the leader of Azur was so deep into la-la land to be a jolly, happy fellow in this situation.

"Their next step must be to legalize it."

"Yep. And ask us to leave the country, I guess."

I shrugged. They wanted to avoid us gaining even more of a positive reputation, but it was proving difficult for them to take care of us with blunt force. The best solution for them now was to have us leave the country.

"Sir Eiji, Lady Tiamat. Are you still up?"

There was a polite knock on the door, followed by a voice. It was Mister Milon.

"Yes. What is it?"

"A royal messenger."

"Here we go."

We stood up from the edge of the bed. A week had passed since we started selling the croquettes, and twenty days had passed since the throne monopolized edamame.

The messenger was the Viscount Zahreed from the other day. Beside him was a figure whose face was cloaked under his hood. I recognized him. I may have been stupid, but not enough to forget my own killer.

"Nice to meet you, King Reinhart Mishima."

I audaciously addressed him... as my voice kind of cracked. It seemed that I still wasn't over it. Our guests jolted, having been discovered before revealing the face under the hood. I could sense their fear. Now we were even. I was scared of my killer, and he was scared that I knew who he was at our first meeting. Finally we were on equal grounds.

"...You said to come here if I wanted something from you. I hope you don't mind."

"Then please, have a seat."

We all sat down, the meeting room table between both pairs. King Reinhart sat across from me and Viscount Zahreed across from Tiamat. Slowly, the King pulled back his hood. He seemed to deem it useless since I knew who he was.

"Then let us hear what brought you out here."

Tiamat remained silent, but I could sense that she was on edge from her portrait. To her, having me killed right under her nose was an unbelievable mistake. If I could put a little faith in myself here, I would have been the same way if my fiancée was killed before my

very eyes. There would not be a second time. Never again.

“Sir Eiji... Uh, Master Hermit.”

Why did you switch it up?

“Yes?”

“Please. We need your help to save our country.”

“Hm? I have acted with that very intention since the day I’ve arrived at Lishua.”

I didn’t understand. What did they think we’ve been doing all this time?

“The other day, we suffered a casualty in the royal army. The first death from that strange disease,” the king said, keeping his voice down.

I scoffed internally. That was a lie. Out on the streets, people have been dying for years; I was sure that many soldiers had already died, too. It’s a little too convenient for their first death to hit now.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

I put on my best sympathetic expression I could find. I had enough mind and decency to not laugh off such news, true or false.

“Why did this happen?! I told him to eat the Hermit Beans! Why did he die?!” King Reinhart raised his voice.

Well... because he didn’t eat them. You think people will just eat what you tell them to, Your Highness?

“Did you take away your blessing on them after we bought out the Hermit Beans?!”

I realized his understanding. Not that there was any kind of blessing to begin with. But I doubted that this king would believe the truth if I told him. People only see and hear what they want to. King Reinhart and myself were no exception.

“A Hermit’s blessing can’t be withdrawn or tacked on so easily.”

“Then explain his death!”

“Did that soldier really eat the Hermit Beans, as much as he needed to? Did you watch him eat them, Your Highness?”

“...I...”

“Of course you didn’t. You can’t be expected to supervise every soldier’s every meal. They could throw the beans away while you’re not looking. Besides, who would want to eat such a thing when they’ve only known it to be livestock feed, just because of an order?”

“...”

“Do you realize why we had been using them in appetizing meals to serve the people?”

I decided to dig a little deeper into King Reinhart as he fell silent. Surely, I was allowed to give him a little taste of his own medicine. He had derailed our operation when we had finally got it on course. And, he killed me once.

“Same goes for gagd meat. Instead of forcing them on people, I believe we need to use them in a way where the people would want to eat them, even when no one is looking.”

The ruler of this nation sulked into his seat.

4.

“What do I do...?”

King Reinhart’s tone had become totally depressed. Perhaps it would have been too cruel to tell him off and to figure it out himself since he was the one in charge. I wasn’t here to pick on the people of this country.

“A bad execution just needs to be corrected, Your Majesty.”

There was no need to obsess over the initial method or the initial goal. A course of action could be corrected as we went along. Being too tied up by the initial plan is a sort of trap that people who deal in absolutes often get caught in.

“If you try to force-feed people the Hermit Beans, of course they’d push back. For people who don’t know what’s going on, they were just told to eat livestock feed.”

Even the most loyal soldier would have been astounded. The soldiers of Azur remained relatively calm, considering that they weren’t offended for being treated like animals. It would not have been hard to imagine a riot or coup breaking out as a result. Food is serious business.

“We didn’t mean the order to come across that way.”

“Of course you didn’t. What king would make a policy with the intent of weakening his own country? I know you meant the best.”

Everyone always does. Shizuru the Hero-King meant the best when he popularized eating rice. He meant to save the people from poverty and starvation; it just happened to cause our predicament today as an end result. A failed good deed tends to cause more damage than a successful evil deed. The worst an evil deed could accomplish is, like, graffiti and annoying people with loud music.

“So you have to start by solving that misunderstanding. The first step is for Your Majesty to publicly declare that Hermit Beans are not feed for livestock.”

“That’s all we need to do?”

As if. Was he listening to anything I was saying?

“As I said, that’s the first step. The second is for Your Majesty to eat the Hermit Beans, and advertise that it is a proper food.”

“We see.”

King Reinhart nodded and shot a glance to his side. Viscount Zahreed produced something from his pocket. I could feel Tiamat

tense up for a moment, but it was just a pen and paper. The viscount began making note of my suggestions. It seemed that the king was ready to take this seriously.

“With those steps, I think we can bring things back to where they started. We’ve only fallen behind from the force-feeding.”

“Urm...” King Reinhart pondered. That was a good sign. He seemed to be considering whether or not my ideas could bring us back to neutral.

“Sir Eiji. I don’t think it will go that easily.”

Good answer. He found it. A bad impression isn’t so easy to wipe away. My ideas so far were far from enough to make up for the king force-feeding his people what was thought to be livestock feed, and King Reinhart realized that too. Which means that he now accurately understood how badly he’d screwed up.

“I agree. It won’t be enough. So, things are going to become more technical.”

With that, I asked for permission to have Mister Milon join us at the table. King Reinhart had no objection. We were the home team, after all.

When Mister Milon entered, he brought with him the secret weapon for turning the game around. Beet sugar. Once it was placed on the meeting room table, I cracked it with a light tap of the fist.

“Please. Have some.”

As I said so, I plopped a piece into my mouth to show that it wasn’t poisoned. This man had the record of poisoning me to death, after all! Wouldn’t be too presumptuous of me to think that he suspected the same thing to happen to him!

“What is this...?!”

After tasting a piece with visible suspicion, King Reinhart fell speechless. It wasn’t that sweetness was hard to come by for him. Surely he had access to maple syrup and honey. He was surprised that he was tasting a brand-new type of sweetness in a commoner’s (albeit a successful businessman’s) abode.

“It is called beet sugar. Another wisdom of the Hermits.”

“This... is the secret behind your Zoom-da?”

Correct. But why’d he have to pronounce it like that?

“Yes. We add this to ground Hermit Beans, and serve it with a cake made from pounding down rice. We call it Zunda mochi.”

“Hrgh...”

“We want the kingdom to buy all of our beet sugar, decide on a price, and put it on the market.”

Exclusive selling rights. My proposition was to have the country make money off of monopolizing the beet sugar, rather than the Hermit Beans. It would have been dangerous to throw beet sugar at

the people of this world when they were still starved of sweetness in their diet. I couldn't even begin to imagine what kind of ailments that would bring.

With the government being the middleman, though, we could control how much goes into the market. And since the government and Mister Milon's business would take a cut, the price wouldn't get too low.

"We would be happy to... depending on the price," King Reinhart replied, carefully choosing his words.

I gave Mister Milon a nod.

"How does ten gold coins per kilogram sound?" the merchant proposed, practically drooling.

Of course, the actual unit they used must not have been kilograms. Still, a kilogram of sugar for about one hundred thousand yen? An outrageous price if proposed in modern times. King Reinhart was stunned.

"Per kilogram...?!"

He couldn't believe it, for the opposite reason.

"Yes. Per kilogram."

A brimming smile grew on Mister Milon's face. He could already taste his victory.

We had discussed the prospect of the government deciding on a fair price for beet sugar back when we first successfully refined it. His business might have been expansive, but it was still dangerous to have Mister Milon in sole control of the beet sugar. That would have made him too much profit. It was just squeezed out of the roots of some weed.

We had made about 50 kilograms of beet sugar from the 1000 kilograms of beets we first harvested. Upon witnessing our yield, Mister Milon was more scared than overjoyed. It was too much. Yielding this much once or twice was one thing, but if this could be expected from every harvest, his profit would be astronomical. Precisely because of his keen sense of business, he sensed danger in the yield ratio.

When Tia and I proposed that the government should buy out the sugar, he wholeheartedly welcomed the idea. The ten gold coins per kilogram price point was decided upon after much deliberation too. While half of that would have profited him plenty, the market price would have been too low. If we couldn't keep the sugar at a price point where a commoner could afford it, but only on occasion, the market would become flooded. Wow, this was hard to figure out.

"For starters, we have a hundred kilograms of it ready for you."

"A-A hundred...?!"

His voice cracking, Viscount Zahreed dropped his pen. While the

king reprimanded him, his voice was a little shrill also. The deal was for one thousand gold coins. Even if the government sold it at double the price, it wouldn't be hard to find buyers. Considering that it could be used in foreign trade, the country would more than double their money.

"And, we would like the kingdom to sell the Zunda mochi containing the beet sugar." With the king's endorsement, I was willing to bet that the dish would popularize in no time. I took a page from the book of Date Masamune.

"To be honest, I feel bewildered, Sir Eiji."

King Reinhart sighed and slapped his cheeks with his hands.

"But what do you two have to gain from this proposal?"

Huh?

Nothing, of course. I was just cleaning up the mess my brother-in-law, the hero, had made.

5.

"We hermits have no interest in worldly riches or fame. Those we happily give to Your Majesty and Mister Milon."

I showed him a smile. The merchant would get the money, and the king would get the fame. Good. It had to be this way. My only job here was to try and correct the course of history in this world distorted by the hero, as much as I could.

"Sir Eiji... Master Hermit!"

Jumping off of the couch, King Reinhart fell to his knees.

What's happening? Where is this going?

As I stood there, dumbfounded...

"We thought that your intentions were to destroy this country! That the strange ailment was caused by the wrath of the Hermits!"

He shouted out his confession.

What? You thought I was some angry Daimajin or something?

"We planned to summon you to my castle to kill you!"

Yeah, I know. Because you already did.

"But you didn't answer my call. Nor did the Hermit Beans help my soldiers. I thought that I had enraged the Hermits."

"Your Majesty. Please stand up. An intention is not a crime."

I stood from my seat and helped King Reinhart to his feet. Anyone could have a passing thought of wanting to kill someone in a moment of anger. I'm sure that many fantasize about how to do it when they do. But as long as that thought isn't acted on, it isn't a crime.

"And there's no need to apologize for something that hasn't happened."

"Sir Eiji..."

“So, please, save them. They are your people.”

I gave him another smile to break the tension. He was trying his best... to be the best ruler he could be. That's why he couldn't keep me, who could threaten the king's power and the entire nation, alive. That's all it came down to.

“I have bestowed you with the wisdom of the Hermits. You must put in the work from here.”

With that, I looked upon the people of this land. It was time to leave. Even though King Reinhart seemed moved now, he would soon loathe my existence. That's how the cookie crumbles. Sharing hardships comes easy for humans, but sharing fame or wealth? Not so much. We are envious creatures by nature.

“Tia and I will be on our way out of the country soon.”

This was something I had discussed with Tiamat before. If we were to save the world, we couldn't remain in the Kingdom of Azur forever.

“Sir Eiji?!” Mister Milon squealed.

Right. I hadn't told him anything.

“Sorry, Milon. We can't stay in one place for too long. I wish we could.”

Tiamat came in for the rescue. That's my partner, all right. Her excuse was bogus though.

“But it's our mistake to surprise you with this on such short notice. Not exactly as a token of apology, but we will leave you with one more piece of wisdom.”

And so, Tiamat began explaining how to make bran pickles. Smooth. Since she had kept that information until now, we wouldn't have to taste-test the pickles. Good job.

According to her explanation, it would take about twenty days to build the setup required and another twenty for the vegetables to pickle. We were off the hook.

“Of course, we're not leaving tomorrow or anything. We do have to pack for the journey,” I said, concealing my internal smirk of sly victory.

All joking aside though, no good would have come from us staying in Lishua any longer. If we wanted to succeed as a ruler or merchant, we would have been much better off with a set base of operations, but we were neither. I just figured it would take us a few days to prepare all of our equipment and supplies for the journey. Naturally we would need some money in our pockets, too. No one can travel with an empty wallet.

“Now, now. Don't you think the government of Azur and Milon's business would help us with that?”

Tiamat cackled, as she always did.

Time flew by, and the morning of our departure arrived. As Tiamat had said, the government, Mister Milon, and even the Adventurers' Guild gladly contributed. They gave us warm clothes, sling packs, and even a donkey to carry our things. I was beginning to feel bad at how much they had gifted us.

While their support was heartfelt, thankfully so were their goodbyes. The prime example, by the way, was Syfer. He insisted on following us, demanding to know why we were abandoning him, and even started saying nonsense like he'll fix whatever it was about him that we didn't like. In the end, he was bawling.

Tiamat and I had a hard time choosing our expressions at this. I did feel grateful for his offer and couldn't brush him off, knowing that he admired us this much. A part of me didn't want to leave either.

Still, Syfer was an adventurer based in Lishua. He had family here. He had to protect his younger brothers and sisters with his own hands and feed them meals he put on the table. We could not allow him to accompany us. Besides, there was much work to do and many responsibilities that fell to those left behind.

The project to save Azur from beriberi had only just begun. With the variety of new products, Mister Milon's business would rapidly expand. In the process he could very well clash heads with the royal government. While Mister Milon himself was a kind man, others may wish him harm.

"So, Syfer. I want you to protect Mister Milon and Miss Millia."

"...I will, Sir Eiji. With my life."

With that, the young A-rank adventurers of Syfer's party agreed to guard Mister Milon's business. From now on, the business and the Adventurers' Guild would fight the outbreak of beriberi hand in hand. Alongside the Azur government too, of course. My job here, for the time being, had concluded.

"Are you ready?"

After a rather violent bang at the door, a large man entered... Who was he? He was about thirty centimeters taller than me, and his muscles were built like armor. His skin was tanned dark, and his long hair was a spectacular silver. My impression was that he was a seasoned warrior. But, for real, who was he?

"It's me, dude. Baze."

"Huh?!"

The Fenrir of Azur Hallow? Wait. This was no time for a mafia game. Mister Baze, as I recalled, didn't exactly look like a human.

"Transformation magic. He's rather conspicuous in his Fenrir form. I taught him the spell over the past few days."

"It transformed his diction too..."

I thought Baze had a rather archaic tone to how he spoke, like a male version of Tiamat.

"It did not. You simply hear him differently because your impression of him has changed."

Okay. I was pretty easily convinced. While the difference may have been more subtle in, say, English, the variety of speech patterns in Japanese made the transformation more jarring to me.

"Is Hieronymus also...?"

"Indeed. Incredibly perceptive as ever, Lord Eiji."

A handsome gentleman popped his head out from behind the hunk of muscle. He wore a cool cavalier hat and a stylish cape with a rapier strapped to his belt. Under his slit black eyes he even had a fancy mustache. He looked annoyingly good.

"Perceptive... I just saw it coming..."

I gave my partner a look.

"Hm. There's no sense in I alone retaining my form. I will also transform."

With a poof, Tiamat's appearance changed. Not into that of my fiancée as I remembered her to be on Earth, but into a beautiful young woman with silver hair and blue eyes, and with a glamorous body as well. She would have fit right in with Hollywood actresses.

Why did she choose that form? Why couldn't she have looked Japanese? It seemed really off-kilter for me to be the only one looking like the average Japanese person.

"Lost in my eyes?"

"I'm lost for words."

I was already exhausted, early in the morning. With a large sigh, I extended my right hand.

"Well, in any case... Bring it in."

"Hm."

"I got your back, bro."

"I shall aid you with all of my might."

Tiamat, Baze, and Hieronymus each put their hand on top of mine.

6.

Mister Milon and Millia were the only ones who came to the city gates to see us off. Our departure was very lacking in fanfare, but that couldn't be helped. Everyone had their own lives, and they couldn't be expected to hang around people who were on their way out.

"Sir Eiji, I wish you safe travels."

"Take care, Mister Milon. And you, Miss Millia."

We shook hands. Behind me stood Tiamat looking like a busty

mage, the bulky Baze holding the donkey's rein, and Hieronymus the light-footed warrior with the cool hat. Of course, Mister Milon was surprised upon first seeing their new forms, but the 'we transformed to be less conspicuous' explanation sufficed. He was cool with that. Good.

"Please give the others my regards," I said as I let go of his hand and headed toward the city gates. They were about to open for the day.

With a slight creek, the gate slowly opened.

"You can give them your regards yourself."

Mister Milon laughed. In the next instant, a booming noise echoed in the city's gate plaza. A sea of people were standing on either side of the travel road. There was Syfer and his team, and Mister Garish and his wife. All of the other people we had made acquaintances with in the city were there too, forming a long, long line.

"Why are...?"

"We already had quite a large gathering before dawn. Since it would inhibit commerce and traffic, we opened the gates earlier than usual," a guard explained as he approached me.

I recognized him, too. He was the guard that received us when we first arrived in Lishua.

"Opened? The gate was closed until a second ago."

"Oh, you know. It was a little surprise."

"You definitely took quite the liberty." I laughed.

If I didn't laugh, I couldn't have helped but express how I felt in another manner entirely.

"A little payback. For the heartless people who saved our city, trying to leave without giving us a chance to thank them."

The guard patted my back. The four of us began walking through the roaring cheers, heading for Noura in the distant east.

"That felt like a finale."

After we walked for a while, and as Lishua was beginning to fade into the horizon behind us, Tiamat made this little comment while sniffing her nose. I understood how she felt. I couldn't handle surprises like that very well. I didn't know how many times I nearly blurted out, "Change of plans, we're staying."

"It was not an eternal farewell. With luck, we should see them again," said Hieronymus. Not without emotion. This one had the brim of his hat pulled down, hiding his face; he was holding back tears. I understood.

Baze, by the way, was bawling with a deep howl, not caring who saw him. The donkey he was pulling seemed very annoyed, though. Apparently a cat and a wolf expressed their emotions quite differently.

“I mean... Tia and I had to go, but there was no reason you two couldn't have stayed. Lord Baze, Lord Hieronymus?”

It wasn't like they were on the job to save the world. No one would blame them for following any path they pleased.

“Shut your mouth right now, my man!”

Baze slapped my back with his open hand. Ow! My spine was going to snap!

“We share a destiny now! You couldn't get rid of us if you tried!”

Bam. Bam.

Please stop. You're going to kill me.

Probably sensing my mortal danger, Hieronymus came in between us.

“Lord Eiji. We are precisely on the path we've chosen. We would be left for fools if you should leave us now.”

A slight smile was on his handsome face, and his silky locks flowed with it.

“Y-You're absolutely right. I'm sorry I mentioned it.”

I apologized, out of breath. My back ached. Tiamat approached me and rubbed my back.

“Y-You do too much for me. If only...”

“Papa. You promised not to mention Mama.”

That's some stupid gag we've concocted.

“Speaking of, Papa. I sense an unruly presence ahead. Have you noticed?”

“How am I supposed to notice that? And stop calling me Papa.”

“Bandits, perhaps?”

Apparently she couldn't discern how many there were, their strength, or what weapons they carried. I mean, she would have been some superhuman if she could tell that much from sensing their presence. Of course, no one else in my party was an ordinary human either. It felt like this was where the wild things were.

“I shall scout them out.”

“Nah, leave it to me. It's been a while since I got some exercise.”

Baze volunteered himself over Hieronymus and handed me the donkey reins.

“I don't worry about you, Lord Baze, but be careful.”

“You betcha.”

He kicked off the ground and accelerated to amazing speeds. He shrank into the distance as I watched. His leg strength was incredible.

“Then why don't we leisurely try to catch up?” Tiamat said, completely relaxed. She showed no sign of concern for Baze jumping the gun.

“Let's.”

To be fair, I felt no concern either. Honestly, if he couldn't handle

the situation, there was nothing I could contribute beyond waltzing over there. If anything I'd only get in the way. We three carried on down the travel road without changing our pace.

After a little bit, Baze returned.

"A caravan was getting attacked ten kilometers down. Probably bandits."

Ten kilometers? Not fifteen minutes had passed since he had left us. He ran the roundtrip of twenty kilometers in that time?

"No?"

Baze crooked his head. It wasn't cute when a huge, towering man did it.

"Five minutes to get there, five minutes to get back. Two minutes to beat up the bandits, and about three minutes to get away from the merchants trying to thank me."

You beat them up, did you?

It couldn't be helped that the combat itself was the shortest part of his little expedition, since he was really a Fenrir. A team of A-rank adventurers had faced him down, ready to die. There was no way any bandits were going to best him.

"Wait, get away from?"

That's the part I was more concerned about. He didn't beat up the merchants too, did he?

"They started yammering about thanking me, or traveling together, or wanting to know my name. I told them our boss man decides that stuff and came running."

Oof. That meant the caravan was waiting for us up ahead. We were barely out of the city, and now we're in another mess.

"Hmm. Should we change course?" Tiamat mumbled, seeming to share my sentiment. They had transformed into humans to avoid attention. We didn't exactly want to star in a parade.

"You have had a change of heart, Lord Baze. Perhaps you should have left the humans to squabble amongst themselves."

Hieronymus grinned. He was teasing the Fenrir, who now completely sympathized with humans after being close to Mister Milon and the adventurers. Hieronymus was in the same boat, though. He had been adored by the spellcasters in town, and many women had shed tears at his departure. Not that I was jealous or anything!

"Go off the travel road you mean, Tia?"

"Mm-hm. We keep going and we'll bump into that caravan. That'll be a whole mess."

"If we do that, though, we may not reach the inn in time."

We weren't in a modern nation where numerous roads crisscrossed each other. There were only a few routes suited for human travel. Once we were off the travel road, our map was

practically useless, too. If we were to go around and get lost, we wouldn't be able to laugh it off. Most importantly, though, I didn't want to sleep on the ground anymore. You have to experience it to know how hard it is.

"No, let's keep going and accept our fate. Even if we go around, we'll probably see them in the next town."

"True. If they decide to wait for us there, there would be no point in altering our route." Tiamat shrugged.

7.

Generally, people in this time period travel on foot. Even in Japan, that was the mainstream mode of transportation until the Meiji era. Naturally there was only so much distance one could cover in a day, which was about thirty kilometers. And about thirty kilometers out of Lishua, there were inns. A natural development.

Based on city locations, inns and restaurants spring up where travelers typically came to rest. As those establishments grow, they form towns. Where people gathered, so did money. On the flip side, towns and villages at an awkward location or too far off the travel road only decline. People only walk past those places, after all.

The same goes for modern-day Japan, too. Even with public transport and automobiles, it's difficult for a countryside village in an inconvenient location to not fade away. Even in my home province of Hokkaido, 147 of the 188 towns and villages are endangered.

"Humans act the same in any world, it seems," Tiamat said, as we walked down the travel road.

"Yeah." I shrugged.

Across time and space, the nature of humanity never changes.

"Why reference *Legend of the Galactic Heroes* now? That's from the anime version, isn't it?"

"Well, I like it, so I reference it."

"Humans envy and hate others while craving love. Humans want results without putting in any effort. Humans want to escape their routine, but hesitate to step outside the box. Humans can't stand someone working hard to achieve something. Humans can't help but be jealous of the success of others. That's human nature."

Do you think they're helpless? Tiamat added. I don't. Humans are creatures of emotion. Jealousy, envy, hatred... If we lose these things we are no longer human, but mere robots.

"Now, it seems we've caught up to our people in waiting in the meantime of our philosophical discussion of human nature," Hieronymus brought to our attention.

We were walking leisurely, but the caravan Baze had rescued

seemed to have waited there. For three hours! Polite was one way to put it, but I was kind of hoping that they would have been gone by now.

“No way around it now. Let’s make their acquaintance. We may thank or curse them for it later.”

“I hope to thank them then.”

We were already stumbling on a roadblock half a day in. Some journey we were on. In the distance, I could see who appeared to be the leader of the caravan noticing and greeting us.

Judging by the amount of luggage, I had pegged them to be traveling merchants, but I was unfortunately off the mark. To our surprise, they were traveling performers.

While that form of entertainment was mostly a thing of the past in modern-day Japan, I have heard that a band of traveling performers still annually visits the hot springs resorts in Jozankei, for example. It was much more popular back when there was less entertainment readily available. There was no radio, TV, or internet in this world. For the most part, people’s enjoyment came from food and drink. And, perhaps, the marital bed.

“What else would a man and woman do after the sun goes down? Even in Japan today, families in the country are big.”

I was being vague on purpose, but this dragon just had to dig deeper, didn’t she? In any case, families in this world also tended to be big. When most of one’s day is consumed by day-to-day life, there isn’t much space for entertainment. That’s why a band of traveling performances were a welcome source of it. While I can’t attest to the accuracy of it, I once read that leaders of these bands were highly respected and sometimes even stepped in to settle disputes in the towns they traveled to.

“How can I possibly thank you for saving our lives?” the respected leader said as he came up to me.

“Please. Baze is the one responsible for it. No need to thank me. Besides, we are adventurers. We are obligated to help those in need.”

Even though we were F-rank, Tiamat and I were still adventurers, yes sir. Cats and wolves, by the way, could not become adventurers.

“I admire your humility unbecoming of your youth.”

The leader seemed impressed. His name was Murdock, a large man who looked to be in his fifties. Which meant that he was most likely around my age. With a rather rushed set of introductions, our familiarity began to grow.

Mister Murdock then called for a member of his troupe and had him bring over something wrapped in cloth. Definitely a token of gratitude. I didn’t even have to guess. Judging by the size, it was cash.

“Please forgive us for repaying our life debts with money.”

With that, Mister Murdock took off the cloth. What appeared from under it was a pile of gold coins, perhaps fifty of them. That was a lot of money. Even my Chronograph only sold for one hundred gold coins.

“Please! We can’t accept this!”

I pushed it back, a little frazzled. If we did accept it, it meant that we were pressure-selling our kindness.

“Still, we have no other way to repay you. We wouldn’t know what to do if you didn’t accept this.”

“I understand, but...”

We didn’t help them hoping for a reward. Really, it was just a coincidence that we happened to save them. Since Baze was the one who saved them, he should be the one to negotiate this, but I couldn’t expect a Fenrir to do that. In fact, he had chucked all the responsibility to me from the very start. With a nod, our silver-haired beauty reached out and took just four gold coins from the pile.

“This will be enough for our reward, Murdock. We are merely F-rank adventurers.”

Four coins. One per member. That was good. It would have hurt Mister Murdock’s pride to rescind his offer now, but fifty coins was way too much for us not to feel guilty about. So, using our F-rank status as an excuse, she accepted an amount that was harmless to both parties.

“How abstemious...”

“Greed hastens death. An adventurer’s mantra.”

“Yep.”

I smiled at Tiamat as she made a self-grandiose declaration, and picked the conversation up from there.

“Mister Murdock. If you’re still unsatisfied, could we ask to join you for lunch?”

I pointed at the sun, almost directly above us. We had been walking all morning, and it seemed an acceptable time for lunch. I couldn’t tell the exact time, though, since I didn’t have my watch!

“Lunch...?”

A slight shadow crossed Mister Murdock’s expression. Oh? I had only suggested it to make him feel better. Was something the matter?

“Our meals are meager... Nothing we can possibly serve to guests...”

Oh. That’s it?

“Please don’t mind us. We are traveling, too. We’d feel bad if you served us an overly proper meal.”

I also added that we would be contributing some food too. To be honest... just having them cook our food would have been wonderful. Our party, including myself, had zero skills in the kitchen. We had a

good amount of gagd meat in our zeer pot on the donkey's back, but we weren't sure how we were going to consume it. Mister Milon went through the trouble of packing it for us, but I was worried that we would have to discard it pretty soon. I wouldn't feel bad for the food if we could eat it all when we had the chance.

8.

The Murdock troupe didn't have a designated cook. As they shared responsibilities within the troupe, they took turns. The chef of the day was a girl named Eily. With light golden hair and reddish-brown eyes, she was fourteen or fifteen. Her role in the troupe was a knife thrower.

"Is this meat... It's cold!"

She was astonished by the gagd meat we provided.

"Were you chilling it with magic, Eiji?"

"No, no. Anyone can make this pot. No magic involved."

I suppose she was more surprised by the zeer pot. We had about four kilos of gagd meat, by the way. There was no sense in us carrying it around, so we decided to contribute all of it. Even if all ten members of the troupe and us four split it, we would each come out with a good amount.

"Everyone would love a side dish," she said.

"I'm glad."

In the zeer pot, we only had a bit of edamame and beet sugar left. Nonperishables were kept in a separate bag. Mister Garish from the Adventurers' Guild had given us rock-hard bread, jerky, and wine. The problem was whether or not my jaw could withstand the bread.

How were we going to survive on our own? Especially if we aren't able to stay at an inn at times. Oblivious to my worries for our future, Eily began cooking rice. It seemed that they mostly ate rice, too. I was impressed, considering they didn't have a rice cooker.

"The people we visit think it's funny."

Catching my glance, Eily stuck her tongue out. Was she doing something funny? I was just thinking that it was impressive how she was cooking rice in a pot over a fire.

"We mix all sorts of things in our rice."

"Really?"

"It feels like just white rice doesn't give us enough energy. We mix in all sorts of things, depending on who's cooking."

Eily showed me a sort of wild rice.

"This is the Eily blend."

It had wheat, millet, brown rice, and even soybeans. There was more variety in there, but I didn't know what the rest of them were.

“Oh!”

It clicked. Because they were traveling, they couldn't always have enough, or expect to get enough, white rice. They had to ration the rice while they traveled. Perhaps they had initially intended to inflate the amount of rice by mixing in other grains. In the end, that saved this troupe from beriberi. No wonder they were all healthy, despite their physical workload. They prevented beriberi, thanks to their own experiences.

“This is the wisdom of humanity. Perhaps they are the real saviors of this world, Eiji.”

Tiamat approached me, impressed. I completely agreed. Humanity has the ability to find the answer. The smell of cooked rice and grilled meat began to fill the air.

“Hmm. I wish there were a little more options for seasoning...” I said, chewing on the bland wild rice. Baze and Hieronymus, on the other hand, were eating it without any complaints. These two basically ate anything. The polar opposite of picky eaters. How wonderful for them.

“Noura faces the ocean. Perhaps they'll have fish sauce or something comparable,” Tiamat said, skillfully maneuvering her spoon. Right. Now that she'd transformed, she could properly use her hands. So could Baze and Hieronymus, who had spent their lives thus far on all fours. Magic worked in mysterious ways.

“Like Shottsuru? Hrm...”

I recalled the taste of the brand of fish sauce I was familiar with.

“I remember you didn't like it or nam pla.”

A brand of Thai fish sauce.

“I don't like how they taste like fish.”

“Then we'll just have to make miso. Sake, too, if we can.”

There were soybeans, and there was rice. Once we have miso, we should be able to make soy sauce and vinegar from there. If we could get to that point, we would really have sparked a change in the culinary culture of this world. Without enough condiments, we could only go so far in our quest of popularizing side dishes if we were only using the flavors of the ingredients.

“But can we go that far...?”

“That ship has sailed. We already created sugar. That will take the world by storm, in no time. No harm in teaching them how to make other condiments.”

“You're right, of course...”

I wanted to prevent a future where the people of this fantasy world are plagued by lifestyle diseases and obesity. Actually, after centuries or millennia those things would become an issue. As

technology and culinary culture improved, any world seemed destined to reach that point. Still, I wanted to keep that in the distant future. At this point, the thought of me pulling the trigger still terrified me.

“You’re overthinking again, about something you’re never going to figure out,” Tiamat said.

And she kissed the back of my head, for some reason.

“... ”

“... ”

“...That’s a unique way of showing your affection, Tia.”

I made sure to grin, ear-to-ear. I bet she tried to bite my head, forgetting that she turned herself into a human. While I couldn’t see her behind me, I was sure that she was blushing. I did it. I had won. Did everyone see that? I won against Tiamat.

“It really makes me feel loved.”

Grinny-grin-grin.

“Shut up!”

“Aghhh!”

My scream echoed. Tiamat, this violent woman, grabbed me by the ear and held me up in the air. Even though she looked like a human now, it seemed that she retained her strength. Isn’t magic wonderful?

“Ow! Ow! You’re tearing my ear off!”

“Eiji the Earless.”

“This isn’t at all like the— Ow ow ow ow ow!”

“Have you learned your lesson?”

“Yes! I have! I’m sorry!”

“Mm.”

She let me go. My ear hurt. I touched it to make sure it wasn’t ripped off...

I had failed. I couldn’t defeat Tiamat.

Heroes of the future. You must fulfill your destiny...

Death.

“What are you talking about, you crazed fool.”

Tiamat smacked me across the head. When I tried to turn around, however, she had me tight in an armlock for some reason. I complied, though. I wasn’t supposed to turn around right now. Unlike the protagonist in the old folklore, I wouldn’t open a door a lady has asked me not to.

“You said Noura faced a sea, right?”

“Mm.”

Then we could get our hands on some pollack roe. Not right away, though, since it was a winter fish.

“I guess we’ll prep to make miso while we research what fish we can catch.”

If the climate here was the same as Hokkaido, we would have the same kind of fish... I hoped. We had already found gagd; we couldn't keep our hopes up too high.

"Mister Eiji. Are you two headed for Noura?" Mister Murdock asked carefully.

I assumed that he was giving us two lovebirds some room. While he wasn't mistaken about our relationship, it didn't seem right to categorize our interaction as something lovey-dovey. Sure, Tiamat is the form my fiancée took upon coming to this world, but she's a dragon now. She only looked human because of a transformation spell; she could still wipe away an entire forest with her breath. We couldn't possibly... do what lovers do, at the moment.

"Yes. For now, our destination is the Kingdom of Noura."

Of course, our journey wouldn't end there. We had to find out how far the aftermath of my brother-in-law-slash-hero's actions reached, and figure out remedies for it. I couldn't let history solve the problem for us with war like it did when I died.

"Would you like to travel with us, Mister Eiji? We're also headed to Noura."

The leader of the traveling troupe smiled at us.

9.

I had to think about that proposition. Tagging along with the Murdock troupe would come with considerable benefits, first and foremost of which was food. While I could barely cook, the other three in my party were even worse. There was no way we could expect any decent meal along the way. We could manage while staying at inns, but if we camped out in the middle of nowhere, I would just starve alone. I mean, I was sure Baze or Hieronymus would hunt something for us, but if they handed me, say, some kind of bird, I couldn't do anything to it.

In that sense, it wasn't a bad choice for us to freeload on the troupe. We had been freeloading at Mister Milon's the whole time we were at Lishua, and now we were going to freeload off the Murdock troupe on our way to Noura. Some Hermits we were.

Setting our lack of pride aside, it was undeniable that traveling with a troupe of performers came with some perks. Most importantly, we would attract much less unwanted attention. It would be a little tiresome to be worshiped as Hermits everywhere we go. If we could accompany the troupe under the guise of security, I expected that we would be able to avoid getting in trouble.

However, we would need to explain to the members of the Murdock troupe our true identities. It was just too dishonest to keep a

secret when they would be accompanying us out of their good will, and keeping a secret only festered the potential damage if and when it ever came to light.

“We can’t stay transformed forever, either.”

“Is that so, Tia?”

“Mm-hm. The spell will break after twelve hours or so. Of course, I can always cast it again, but being in a skin that is not my own can be a little stressful.”

“That’s the way it is, huh?”

“For example, even if you dressed in drag for work, you wouldn’t want to keep it up off the clock.”

“I don’t remember working for such a free-spirited city that I would need to dress in drag to work as its clerk.”

That would be one funky city office. That being said, I understood what Tiamat meant. Blending into the crowd was one thing, but I didn’t think it was an uncommon desire to want to return to their true form at night or in private. I have been told that the first thing women want to do when they come home is to take off their makeup.

“If we’re going to be with the Murdock troupe, you guys, for the most part, want to do so in your regular forms.”

“Mm-hm. We’ll transform when we’re walking into a city.”

“We’ll see if that’s an acceptable condition for Mister Murdock.”

After a very short huddle, I returned to Mister Murdock and revealed my identity as a Hermit to see if they would still accompany us.

“Oh, that.”

Mister Murdock accepted my explanation much too easily. It seemed that he knew from the start. Egg on my face.

“When Mister Baze single-handedly took care of the bandits, he was too strong and too fast to be human. No one would expect his ‘Boss Man’ to be a mere human, either.”

He was laughing. Unfortunately, I was a mere human. If we went into combat, I doubted I could even beat Miss Eily the dagger-thrower. I didn’t have any cheat codes, after all. The truth hurt.

“You overestimate me, but let us redo our introductions. I’m Eiji, a Hermit. And this is Tiamat, also a Hermit.”

In response to my introduction, Tiamat poofed back into her dragon form.

“Baze the Fenrir, and Hieronymus the Cait Sith.”

The other two followed suit. While the members of the troupe were surprised, they didn’t fall into a panic. They had some guts. Syfer’s team was ready to die fighting Baze when they first encountered him. I wondered if the title of Hermits carried some weight here. By the way, the women were gathering around

Hieronymus again. A good-looking human form and irresistible to women in his true form? He didn't have to rub it in my face, dammit.

"Oh... Ohhh..."

While not panicking, one of the members was brought to tears. The storyteller, as I recalled, who told various legends and myths throughout the show. I imagined the role to be similar to an Ainu (the indigenous people of Japan) storyteller.

"A hermit leading a dragon, Fenrir, and Cait Sith... Embarking on a journey to save the world from destruction..."

Stop that. Don't make it into a poem. Don't go spreading this around like it's some legendary story. Please.

The Murdock troupe, whom we stumbled into accompanying for the journey, was a group of ten members with an enclosed, two-horse-drawn carriage. They were a rather large travel group with a wide age-range, too, from a ten-year-old boy to an elder in his sixties. Mister Murdock was 46, by the way. Of course, everyone was surprised when I told them my age; I was getting used to it. They usually spent about two years at a time touring each nation in these parts, about eight in total. A grand tour spanning over one hundred cities.

"By any chance, have you noticed beriberi outbreaks in the cities you've visited?"

"Yes, of course."

Mister Murdock nodded with a painful expression. As expected, the issue reached beyond the borders of Azur. The farming system that Mister Hero had brought over did, indeed, change the world. Steady production, efficient harvesting, and most importantly, better taste. That's what a batch of Kirara 397, one of the best-rated varieties of rice today, would do to a medieval fantasy world. It's tasty on its own to the spoiled taste buds of the modern Japanese. No one would substitute that for an inferior tasting product. Dear brother-in-law had really left us with quite the uphill battle.

"And how is beriberi understood in these cities?"

"For most, they don't know what causes it. I'm sure the mage doctors are researching it, too."

I shook my head. If magic could put a dent in the problem, neither Tiamat nor I would have been summoned.

"Healing magic isn't even for curing diseases," the dragon joined in.

She was slapping the ground with her tail. I somehow felt more comfortable seeing her like this.

"It isn't, Tia?"

"Magic cannot regenerate lost blood nor eradicate cancerous cells. Or stop the aging process, for that matter. It is not omnipotent."

Good point. If magic could cure diseases, there should be no one dying from any in this world. If magic could slow aging, there was no reason that the life expectancy in this world would be shorter than ours.

“But not in Lishua. We only passed through the city, but they all seemed healthy.”

“I’m glad.”

I returned a smile to Mister Murdock’s comment. While the venture was only in its infancy, both edamame and croquettes were slowly getting popularized. I was sure that the bran-pickling knowledge Tia left behind would eventually come to fruition, too.

“So that was thanks to your team, Mister Eiji?”

“I hope our knowledge was of help to them.”

I wanted things to go in a better direction, somehow.

“I think it’s admirable. By the way, why do we not catch that... beriberi, was it?” Mister Murdock asked, as the question seemed to spring up in his mind.

“Your diet,” I answered simply. “Mixing those grains into your rice is preventing you from being afflicted.”

“I see. How funny that us being cheap ended up saving us.”

We laughed. We can’t thoughtlessly relish our innovations and new conveniences. There can be quite the pitfalls hidden behind those conveniences.

“Everything is connected, somehow. Bringing in the wisdom of Hermits to this world warps that connection,” Tiamat said.

“And, to fix that connection, we have to use more Hermit wisdom.” I shrugged.

“The lesson must be that no problem is as simple as it seems,” Mister Murdock concluded. “It’s a harsh world we live in.” He chuckled.

10.

By the time our eastbound journey had brought us into the kingdom of Noura, the seasons were shifting away from midsummer and into late summer. Ordinarily our route would not have taken us this long, but since we matched our pace with that of the Murdock troupe, we had to stay longer at all of the towns they performed in. However, that wasn’t a disadvantage for us at all. We were able to advertise edamame everywhere we went. To boot, the storyteller of the troupe even told a made-up legend about the bean, making it a smash hit.

To save us from destruction, the Hermits blessed a crop of beans and

called it Senzu.

Why did they bless livestock feed, of all things?

To remonstrate us, fellow humans.

We were depraved in our peace and prosperity, after the Demon Lord's demise.

Remember.

Remember the times of suffering.

Remember how we ate dirt to survive.

Remember the fighting spirit, to defeat the Demon Lord at any cost.

Now you're above eating livestock feed?

Behold, how weak you've become!

We ate everything we could. Weaponized everything we could.

Crawled back up on our feet, as many times as it took.

The storyteller sung something like that, with a dramatic flare. Accompanying that, the members of the Murdock troupe danced and performed tricks. It was like an improvised dance and performance. The epic tale of the hero's journey to defeat the Demon Lord, then the epilogue of peace and prosperity, followed by the Hermits' remonstration.

The crowd enjoyed watching the performance unfold in spaces like the town plaza, with an ale in one hand and edamame or gagd meat in the other. We had sold the gagd meat we hunted for along the way and the edamame we bought from farmers to local restaurants for dirt cheap so they could serve the audience.

This was a great hit. The crowd tore into the grilled gagd meat and washed down edamame with ale as they enjoyed the show, stomping their feet and cheering along the way. They were enthralled by Eily's thrilling knife throws, Murdock and Hieronymus' (why was he a part of this?) grand and elegant swashbuckling, and the dancers' evocative dances.

When they awoke the next morning, they were much less lethargic. Edamame flew off the shelves, as people experienced the Hermits' blessing firsthand. Of course, our supply was far from enough to meet the demand. Merchants rushed to neighboring farmers. The producers were overjoyed that there were now buyers for the overgrowing soybeans.

Word traveled through the grapevine, and the Murdock troupe, who usually only performed once per town, ended up performing twice or thrice in each town we passed through. Each day and night crowds packed the plaza, a storm of coins for the performers flew through the air, and the restaurants near the plaza were overflowing

with customers seeking Hermit Beans and gagd meat. Since the meat was less readily available, Baze went hunting for some every now and again.

As we continued our very slow-paced journey, a specialty of the capital city, Lishua, caught up to us: Zunda mochi. The traveling merchants, who traveled much lighter than performers, were bringing over the Lishua specialty by carrying the ingredients in zeer pots on a wagon.

“Something special about a chilled Zunda mochi.”

According to Tiamat, anyway. That’s just her dragon appetite talking, though. The proper way to enjoy Zunda, to me, was by topping fresh mochi with it. Since they must have made them in the morning and put them in the zeer pot, it was kind of tough by the time we ate it.

And they were expensive. A whopping four silver coins for a single Zunda mochi, when I could fit two of them on my palm. When we were selling them in Lishua, they were a silver coin and change a pop. What a ripoff. Despite the ridiculous price, these flew off the carts, too.

“Apparently, Reinhart himself is leading a public promotion.”

Tiamat had gathered some intel from the traveling merchants. We didn’t give him a golden ticket for nothing, it seemed. According to stories we were told, King Reinhart stood on street corners, promoting Zunda mochi to passersby. His knight guards pounded the mochi while the women of his court made the Zunda. The king then put the two together and handed them out, saying:

“This is the new specialty of Azur, bestowed upon us by the Hermits. Enjoy.”

What a bizarre scene. I think I remember seeing a similar one on a historical drama on TV. I wished I could have been there to see it, too.

And so, that’s how it took us over a month to make it out of Azur.

“The thing is, now we have a new problem on our hands.”

“Mm. I didn’t expect to not make it into the capital of Noura before summer’s end. Didn’t see it coming.”

We were at a border station. We had left Mister Murdock to the bureaucracy of international entry while us two stood idly and discussed our plans moving forward. Tiamat and the other two were in their human forms while we were crossing the border.

It was late summer. At this rate, it would be well into fall by the time we made it to Nourn, the capital of Noura. While we weren’t particularly in a hurry, there was one problem with that: the harvest season for edamame. Early to midsummer was the time of year best suited for eating soy beans in their edamame form. After that the

beans are overgrown and too hardened to serve as edamame. At the same time, fall is the harvest season for rice, which meant that the consumption of white rice was about to drastically increase.

“That’s actually quite a problem.”

Tiamat twirled her long, silver hair with her right hand. I had witnessed this tick a few times back in Japan too. She did this when she was troubled.

The fact that we didn’t make it to Noura for midsummer meant that we didn’t make it for the time of year when beriberi is most active. Who knew how many people were lost to beriberi in that time, unbeknownst to us?

While I couldn’t help but feel remorseful, there was nothing I could have done. I couldn’t be the superhero who saves everyone, but I was resolved to help those I could... Although, even that I would be far from perfect at.

“Thanks to Murdock’s bunch, I think we made some solid grassroots progress. We’ll have to tackle Noura moving forward. Time for good ideas, Eiji.”

“Right. Fall, and then winter... What could we do?”

“How about Amazake?”

Amazake is a drink so nutritious that it’s nicknamed ‘oral IV.’

“We’d have to start with sake, though.”

“Mm. Since we’ll have to use sake lees for it.”

“Now we’re talking about how we can make sake.”

We didn’t have any malt. I mean, we might if we looked for some, but that would be an excruciating process. Malt was basically mold, after all. I doubted we could find any if we tried.

As far as I could recall, there are artisans who specialize in that field. When building a new sake brewery, for example, they first have to call one of the Toji groups, who collectively oversee all sake production in Japan. The quality of rice, water, and malt make or break the batch of sake. We couldn’t very well use some random mold we’d find. Even in modern-day Japan, I think they only breed from a mother-batch of high-quality *aspergillus*.

“I could chew on the rice for a while,” Tiamat suggested.

“That’s not going to be pretty.”

Chewing sake had been made in ancient Japan, where people would mix rice with their saliva and fill a pot with that until it fermented. Gross, right? While some may find pleasure in such things, I was not one of them. I had no desire to eat anything regurgitated by someone else, even if that someone was my beloved fiancée.

“Then, we’ll have to find malt we can use.”

“Yep. At the end of the day, we’re going to need to make miso and soy sauce, too.”

It seems the fact of the matter is Japanese cuisine is nonexistent without malt. Dammit. Where did all of those Isekai-political-fantasy protagonists get malt?

Oblivious to my woes, Mister Murdock waved us over, having completed the paperwork.

We were about to begin our life in the kingdom of Noura, the second country we'd come across in this world.

The Truth Around the Corner

1.

Once we passed through the mountains, our view opened up all of a sudden. An endless blue in front of us, with infinite cresting waves. The ocean. We had arrived at a seaside kingdom from a landlocked one.

“Rgh... The seabreeze feels amazing.”

“Hm. There’s about twenty kilometers between us and the ocean. You couldn’t possibly feel any seabreeze.”

Tiamat countered my sentiment. Why did she have to say things like that? Placebo’s a thing. The ocean isn’t less real just because we’re looking down on it from atop a mountain.

“I just wanted to enjoy the setting.”

“Because you’re human. Tia-o.”

The ridiculous back-and-forth had become a routine.

“Still, many have the same reaction as you, Mister Eiji. It’s a dramatic change of view.”

Mister Murdock laughed as he pulled the reins from atop the carriage. I was walking, by the way. We had been traveling for over a month. I couldn’t be the weakling forever. With a little tan as well, I think I was beginning to show my wild side, if I do say so myself.

“Only our boss man would brag about catching up to the average,” the much-wilder-than-I mountain of a man remarked.

Laugh it up. It was an achievement for me to be able to keep walking all day long.

“Now, now. He’s come a long way, Mister Baze. Remember, when we first started, he spent most of the day in the carriage. When he finally started walking, he’d give up in a few hours. Compared to those times the difference is night and day.”

Please, Mister Murdock. If your intention is to defend me, please stop talking.

“In any case, we’re on course to arrive at our destination by sundown. I’ve missed the sensation of a soft bed under my paws,” said Hieronymus.

Miss Eily walked alongside the refined gentlemen, and they seemed to be getting along smoothly. Human form? Cat form? Didn’t matter to this chick magnet. Disgusting.

As Hieronymus mentioned, we had been camping out the past few

nights, as there weren't any inns along the mountain pass. The first city after the mountains was going to be Mostail. As the second largest city in Noura, it apparently served as an entry point for travelers via land and sea.

The Murdock troupe intended to show their first performance in Noura at Mostail. Of course, there was no guarantee before they could speak to the lord or lady of the city and be granted permission.

"Are your permits ever denied, Mister Murdock?"

We had been traveling with the troupe for a while but I had yet to see that situation. It seemed unrealistic that the people of this world starving for entertainment would turn down traveling performers after they've already arrived at the city.

"It does happen. Sometimes the plaza is booked for another event, and other times they can't be bothered with performances."

"Can't be bothered?"

"When preparing for battle, for example."

"Oof."

I wasn't in peaceful Japan anymore. The lord/lady of a city had a completely different role than the mayors of Japan I was used to. They were tasked with running the city bestowed upon them by the crown, safe and sound. Fighting against bandits and monsters was part of the job description. That's why they were granted decision-making powers and an army. The only reason I didn't come across such a scene was dumb luck.

"If possible, I would like to keep our journey peaceful."

"That's what they call Chekhov's gun, Eiji."

Tiamat was right. All because of my stupid mouth, the Murdock troupe was facing a possible cancellation of their performance in Mostail.

"As if. This is just a coincidence."

"Hm. Who are you trying to convince?"

When we arrived at Mostail, I could feel the tension in the air. Apparently, an army of monsters came close to the city, where battle ensued. The opposing force of ten thousand was mostly comprised of goblins and orcs, with a few ogres and cyclopes, too. That was more than a decent militia.

Even if the city fought them off from their walls, the city would take hits. And if enough enemies breached the walls, to the point where there were too many to eradicate, Mostail itself would fall. That would be a critical loss for the kingdom of Noura, as they would lose their trading post out west and their major seaport. The safest tactic was to keep the battle a siege and protect the walls while waiting for reinforcements from the capital... but even that was risky.

Things weren't looking good. Faced with an uphill battle, Earl Mikhail Agamemnon, Lord of Mostail, made a daring decision. Not fighting the monsters head-on nor defending a siege, but guerrilla warfare, utilizing his army of one thousand. They used the shadowy forest, the dark of night, hunting traps, anything they could to lessen the number of the monsters. In fact, they were fighting like typical monsters themselves, appearing out of nowhere and disappearing again.

Of course, there were reasons behind choosing this unusual strategy. First, they couldn't very well only defend Mostail. There were neighboring towns and villages that were unprotected. Things would turn very gruesome if the monsters changed their targets to those towns and villages. Being innocent civilians, many would die without much of a struggle. Farmland would be decimated, too.

"Most importantly, a soldier's duty is to protect their people. Being under my command was your misfortune. I need every single one of you to give your life in exchange for at least ten of those monsters. A thousand of us, and ten thousand of them. That would eliminate us both from this world."

That was a quote from the earl's speech upon deployment. Moved by his determination, his loyal warriors forsook both their pride and chivalry as soldiers and knights, turning into monster-hunting machines.

With their elaborate armor cast aside, they blended into nature with mud smeared all over them. They hid in the shadows, picking out monsters one by one. Apparently there was even a battalion that took the place of one of the monster's teams, then got close to other monster teams before stabbing them in their backs.

This was, in no way, how the honorable Knights' Order was expected to fight. But they found pride in nothing else but protecting their people. Therefore, they wanted nothing but victory.

Earl Agamemnon's army fought on with tragic determination. While they succeeded at slowing down the monsters, there was no way that their tactic was going to last. The one thousand plus Earl's army had lost half of its soldiers already, and the remaining half was becoming too exhausted to function as a military. They had taken down 20% or so of the monsters with them, but the other 80% were still going strong.

The Earl had no other option but to have faith that the royal army of Noura was traveling fast during the few days' time his men had bought... and to turn the battle into a siege, ready to die with his castle.

This is when we arrived. A traveling troupe of performers waltzing into the depressing atmosphere. I couldn't tell you how

painful the glares of the guards were, prodding as if to say “What the hell are you doing here?” Well, we couldn’t help it. How were we supposed to know what was going on when we came in from the other side?

“I’m sorry that you’ve come all this way, but we don’t have the luxury to enjoy such things at the moment. Moreover, this city will soon turn into a battlefield. I implore to leave, quickly.”

Earl Agamemnon did grant us an audience, though, and said this to us. It translated to ‘go back the way you came.’ While he looked exhausted, he seemed like an excellent man to me. Still, we couldn’t very well take his offer and run.

“I think that this, too, is a part of our world-saving endeavor.”

Tiamat shrugged her shoulders.

2.

Tiamat, Baze, Hieronymus, and I volunteered to join Earl Agamemnon’s army. I was sure that the Earl didn’t account for F-rank adventurers being of much use, but he couldn’t deny that he wanted all hands on deck. Every grain of sand towards tipping the scale. Then, I told the Murdock troupe to leave Mostail.

“There’s no point in running if the city is to fall. With our slow pace, we wouldn’t get far anyway.”

Mister Murdock rejected the suggestion. I didn’t try to convince him any further. He was absolutely right, and running from the city in no way guaranteed their safety. If monsters decided to go around the city and chase after them, they would be done for.

“Besides, there’s no time left to run.”

“Yep. The bad boys are marching in, full force.”

Tiamat and Baze pointed out the monsters’ movement, sensing the situation. Of course, I didn’t have such instincts.

“They’re sick of the attrition, it seems. They must intend to break through the walls, ready to lose a portion of their army,” Hieronymus explained, like a military strategist.

This baron made sure he played all of the cool roles. Acknowledging his comment, I turned to Tiamat.

“How do you feel, Tia?”

“In this form, I doubt I can take care of all of them.”

In other words, she would have turned all of them to ash if she were in her dragon form.

“Baze and I will cause a distraction, while Earl Agamemnon’s men will push them out of the city. That seems like the rational course of action.”

“I think rationality has fled the country.”

She just claimed to be able to stop a monster army of eight thousand in their tracks, with just the two of them, both still in human form. This dragon princess.

“Can I be of any assistance?” Hieronymus asked.

“No need. You will protect Eiji. Without me, he wouldn’t even be able to best Eily.”

“Aye aye, lady commander.” Hieronymus bowed ceremoniously.

My pride? What’s that? I certainly didn’t expect to regain any here.

“Earl, it seems the enemy is on the move,” I said.

“What... are you...?”

Earl Agamemnon stared back, dumbfounded. No duh. The troupe of traveling performers that could not have come at a worse time just refused to leave a worn-torn city and began plotting like they had a chance. I couldn’t blame him for thinking we were nuts.

“We’ll distract them to make an opening. At the right time, you and your men have to finish them off.”

“What are you...”

“Earl Agamemnon. Mister Eiji and Miss Tiamat are Hermits,” Mister Murdock chimed in.

Thank you. Oh, thank you. I thought I was going to be forced to say it myself. Given the Japanese consider humility a virtue, that would have been an embarrassing experience. Very embarrassing.

“Excuse us, we’re going to climb on top of the city wall.”

The wall that contained Mostail was about three meters high. It looked pretty sturdy, but it was no fort. Just a thick wall, with no equipment to fend off enemies nor archers’ stations atop it. Tiamat, Baze, and Hieronymus followed me... as well as the Murdock troupe, for some reason.

They carried drums, gongs, and other instruments with them. Then I realized their plan. They were an improv troupe, after all. They planned to accompany our heroism with music. The old storyteller was even warming up his throat, rubbing it with his hand.

“Mister Murdock? This is real war.”

“Is there such a thing as fake war, Mister Eiji?”

The troupe leader grinned.

The gong blared through the air. Four silhouettes stood atop the city walls with the steady beat of heavy drums in the background.

“Hear ye, hear ye!”

The storyteller’s voice rang. From how we were standing, it must have appeared like I was the one talking.

“You filth who dare desecrate this city, blessed by the Hermits!”

There that old man went with his nonsense. We had just arrived at

Mostail moments ago. What blessing was there to give?

"If you fear the wrath of the heavens above! Cower while you can!"

He kept going, throwing all sorts of things across the field. Of course, the monster army didn't falter. An ominous cloud began to rush towards us from the southeast. Even though I was just told that there were eight thousand of them, I couldn't see their numbers in person. To be honest, I was terrified.

"I'll go right."

"Then I'll go left."

The dragon and the Fenrir beside me made their plans cheerfully. So casual, like they were going for a little stroll.

The gong rang again. The next instant, a bright light tore through a chunk of the monster army! It was Tiamat's Laser Breath. How did she fire that in her human form?! Before I could ask that question—

"Long-range weapon out of the blue? Girl, you're scary!"

Baze leapt, kicking off of the city wall and traveling over a hundred meters before landing in the middle of the enemies. He tore through the writhing goblins like he was mowing the lawn.

The troupe began playing some heroic music. The curtains were raised on our feast of blood and destruction.

"That can be scary in its own way." Tiamat smiled. "I'm off as well. Be a good boy, Eiji."

"Be careful."

With a light peck on my cheek, she jumped off of the wall. I guess jumping down three meters was nowhere near dangerous for these two.

The monster army was slammed into the depths of chaos...

"Baze the Star Breaker and Tiamat the Dragon Princess. The Hermits' sword. The Hermits' shield."

...accompanied by the storyteller's song. Before I knew it, many residents of the city had climbed the wall to cheer on Tiamat and Baze. Wait a minute. These people were solemn and depressed a minute ago.

"Lord Eiji. The enemy will break soon. An opportune timing."

Hieronimus ceremoniously gave me his advice, standing beside me. The monsters struggled to regain their formations to no avail. Baze tore apart any defensive formation they tried to take, and Tiamat blew through any concentrated attack formation with her Laser Breath. They were trampling those monsters. With a nod, I shouted from the bottom of my gut:

"Open da gates!"

Urr. A little Hokkaido dialect came out. Still, my meaning didn't seem lost, as the city gates opened with a rumble. Lined up behind it

were Earl Agamemnon's soldiers, 450 of them in all. They were hurt and exhausted, but their eyes burned bright with fighting spirit.

"Behold! The brave warriors charge!" continued the storyteller.

He was explaining even the obvious stuff because not every person in the city was able to see it happen. This was the same in their usual performances, where they didn't have a proper theater or stage to perform on. In order to make sure everyone in the audience knew what was happening, they had to employ a little over-narration. The gong rang furiously as the music climaxed.

"Charge!"

With the earl's call his army ran out, as fast as a loosed arrow. Horseshoes tore through and flattened the monsters. Bravely, Earl Agamemnon himself was leading the charge. At this point, something came up beside him: a Fenrir, his brimming white fur blowing in the wind. Before he even had the chance to wonder if the Fenrir was an enemy, the earl was on its back.

"A hero is chosen! By Baze the Fenrir, Hermits' Sword!"

The people roared in response to the storyteller's declaration. Riding Baze, Earl Agamemnon kept shouting for his army to charge, swinging his longsword while engulfed in the crowd's excitement. He was the hero, no doubt about it. The earl's army, almost too energized, charged even faster.

3.

After that, everything happened so fast. Our team of 450 (+ 2) decimated the monster army of eight thousand in a single blow, literally. I doubted that there were more than a thousand monsters left. Having given up on the battle, they began to flee. While they still had the earl's army beat by numbers, they were losing by every other standard.

"We won, Lord Eiji."

"...Yeah, we did."

The city was already in party mode. Victory had come in one glorious swoop from a hopeless situation. Who among them could contain themselves now? Still, I couldn't help but withhold my reply to Hieronymus for a moment. Not because I was suddenly scared of the massacre I helped orchestrate or anything.

"Is something the matter, Lord Eiji? It seems to me that something is troubling your thoughts."

"Lord Hieronymus. Is it in a monster's nature to retreat so cleanly?"

"Hrm?"

Hieronymus gazed toward the distance, following my line of sight.

The monsters were retreating as they gathered each other from every corner of the battlefield, keeping the injured in the center of their horde, and watching their backs.

“...No, that does not seem right. No sense that goblins and orcs can execute those strategic movements.”

“Indeed.”

Tiamat, transformed back into her dragon form, landed on the wall with a few flutters of her wings.

“Tia. You’re all right.”

I sighed in relief. I knew that she was stupidly powerful, but that still didn’t make me eager to send her out onto the battlefield.

“A piece of cake! ...Is what I want to call it, but it became a little too difficult for my human form, so I turned back. Same with Baze, I assume.”

Hm. Did that mean she actually had a tough fight on her hands, despite the nonchalant attitude?

“None of us fear a horde of a hundred goblins, but Lord Syfer’s team would. Is that what you mean, Lady Tiamat?”

“Mm-hm.”

I understood what he meant, too. The most definitive difference between an army of monsters and an army of humans is order. Humans are much weaker than monsters, and that’s a fact. We don’t have the body of an elephant, the fangs of a lion, the speed of a cheetah, or anything like that. While there were a few warriors who could handle several ogres in this world, they were unmistakably the exception.

At our core, humans are weak. For our weight class, we are the weakest in the animal kingdom. Yet, humans rule the world. Even in my homeland of Hokkaido, it wasn’t the Hokkaido wolf or the brown bear that was crowned champion, but humans. For simple reasons, too. Humans fight together. Humans implement strategies. Humans think ahead about what needs to be done to secure that victory. These things are huge, you know.

Monsters, though, don’t do any of that. They attack on instinct and flee when they fear for their lives. Or else they fight to their deaths without any forethought. A monster could defeat a human, but monsters could never defeat humans.

“They began to retreat, seeing that they didn’t stand a chance after our attack,” Tiamat said.

“They lost almost nine-tenths of their army.”

“That’s the thing, Hieronymus. Losing 90% is a miserable defeat, but what does nine thousand mean to orcs and goblins.”

“...Indeed, not much.”

Goblins and orcs, apparently, rapidly multiplied. I believe this is

the case in most fantasy pieces too. I've never heard of an endangered goblin species.

"Perhaps their commander is even content to have a thousand left."

"So you think the monster army has a brain, Lord Hieronymus?"

"Indeed," the handsome gentleman confirmed. It was fishy that an army of monsters was after a crucial trading port to begin with. Their attack was clearly strategic.

"Monsters waging war..."

I pondered that with my arms crossed. I couldn't help but imagine the worst. That being said, Earl Agamemnon's men moved too well to be afflicted by beriberi. With war, people can't afford white rice and start to mix in other grains. I had heard of that scenario. By this point, it had been almost two months since I first heard it. Was it all a coincidence?

"What's wrong, Eiji? You don't look too good."

Showing concern, Tiamat came at me with the tried-and-true.

"You don't mind if your boyfriend doesn't look good, Tia?"

"Not that I fell for your face to begin with. I was after that sweet, sweet bod."

She was grinning. What a lousy fiancée she was. Just watch the tears form a river down my cheeks.

In any case, we had won. The city of Mostail erupted, and the earl's soldiers returned to be greeted with a storm of hugs and kisses from the girls of the city.

The one most adored, though, was Earl Agamemnon, who had fought valiantly on Baze's back. He looked as glorious as a legendary hero... before rushing towards me and kneeling before me, in a sign of swearing his loyalty. This happened just as I had climbed down from the city wall. I didn't really need that kind of thing, though. I would only make more unnecessary enemies now.

"Sir Eiji. Master Hermit. My words fail me to thank you for saving our city."

"The credit belongs to you, Earl Agamemnon. We only lent a small helping hand."

I took the earl's hand to stand him up.

"And so the hero earns the Hermit's trust," the storyteller proclaimed, as loud as he could.

Someone stop that old man.

Why did he have to narrate that kind of thing, just at the right moment? No one's tossing you coins, you know?

"Sir Eiji..."

"It's not a show of humility. There would have been no victory

without you and your army holding them off until now.”

If they had been defeated before we arrived, we naturally would have had no way to help them. Guerrilla warfare was the right choice, too. In order to combat that, the monsters formed an attack on the city while expecting to suffer casualties. It was indisputable that Tiamat and Baze could fully utilize their strengths only because the monsters were attacking through the front door.

If their method of attack was sneakier like monsters usually were, even Tiamat would have had a hard time dealing with them. It wasn't amiss of me to say that most of the credit was due to Earl Agamemnon. We just happened to be here at the right time and took advantage of the situation.

“That being said, we did put some work in. I don't think anyone would criticize you for buying us dinner.”

I winked. Maybe that was too much showboating. But asking for a meal wasn't just to look cool; I wanted to know what they ate. The earl brightened his expression. We weren't asking for money or titles nor making unreasonable requests like meeting the king. Our demand was the best-case scenario for the lord of Mostail.

“Mm. Not that you put any work in, Eiji. It was mostly Baze and I who put in the work.”

Tiamat tossed in this jest at the perfect time. Thanks, partner.

“You didn't have to tell them that, Tia.”

Of course, I jumped on it, and the crowd laughed. It was a pretty good icebreaker. Of course, Tiamat and I didn't want to make a living as a comedy duo... just in case that was unclear.

“If we were not at war, we could do so much more...” the earl said.

“Please. We're travelers. We would almost feel uncomfortable with an excessive celebration.”

“You are too kind.”

“At war, you said?”

“Yes...”

The earl lowered his voice, somewhat.

A month ago, the monsters suddenly became much more threatening. They were no longer creatures that adventurers could hunt down. They were organized and efficient.

“As if a king has appeared and began ruling over them...”

I felt a chill as the distinguished earl whispered this.

4.

The celebration began. Boy, was that a storm. Who could have asked them to keep it down when their prospect of being overrun by

monsters changed to a victory in an instant? The saved-up food and drink were released, and the Murdock troupe brightened the party with song and dance.

There was an incredible crowd at the city's central plaza, reminiscent of the Nebuta festival in Aomori. As I recall, that festival is also a celebration of victory, celebrating Sakanoue no Tamuramaro's conquering of the Emishi people. That's why it's a no-holds-barred party.

It has a unique chant that apparently came from people chanting for 'more and more' celebratory sake. The fact that the haneto dance has no rhyme or reason to it is because of the same reason, I bet. Drinking while jumping up and down from the excitement of victory. No sign of etiquette there.

That's exactly how Mostail was. Baze and Agamemnon were holding each other's shoulders, singing a song off-key. The beautiful women of the city were dancing a fast dance with Hieronymus. They all seemed to acclimate to the city just fine. I had decided to step away from the commotion to watch the crowd, just because I felt like it. You know, as a descendant of the conquered Emishi, I had a hard time jumping into this victory party.

"Hm. The Emishi that Sakanoue no Tamuramaro conquered were in no way the people of Hokkaido."

"Right-a-roo."

Emishi meant 'the people of Ezo,' but Hokkaido wasn't called Ezo until modern times. To be more specific, the first use of the word in that way was at the end of the feudal era in Japan. That didn't mean that no one occupied Hokkaido at the time. The Ainu lived there, of course.

"Even the signature chant of the Nebuta festival is theorized to have derived from the Ainu language. While we're at it, Kyosuke Kindaichi explored the theory that the word Emishi derived from Ainu, too."

He was a famous linguist in Japan, by the way. Her trivia DLC strikes again.

"What do you think, Tia?"

Of course, I wasn't asking about the Nebuta festival nor the Ainu language.

"The timing is too perfect to brush it off as a coincidence."

The course of this world's history changed after my death. The Inspector had said that beriberi casualties drastically decreased afterward. I didn't choose that world though. I refused to solve the issue by war and demanded a redo. The history we were writing now was one where Eiji the Hermit was not killed, so Syfer and Millia did not flee the country, and Azur and Noura won't go to war.

“But the answer was shown.”

“Mm-hm. I agree, Eiji. I think the god of this world learned from your mistake.”

I didn’t ask that the god learn. It was obvious. During war times, day-to-day luxuries are taken away. Beriberi wouldn’t stand a chance, just like it didn’t in Japan during WWII.

“Theory: The god of this world summoned someone else. Not as an aid for humans, but for monsters.”

“Agreed. Then, everything makes sense,” said Tia.

The kingdom of Noura was at war with strangely organized monsters and their newfound strategic tactics. It was outlining this one possibility.

“But, why now? If summoning can be done willy-nilly, wouldn’t it be much easier to tweak the history of when Shizuru was here?”

No need to bring in Mister Fix-it. The god of this world just had to kill the hero on the spot after he defeated the Demon Lord. None of our current problems would have surfaced. It just seemed that everything the god of this world did was reactionary and didn’t quite hit the mark.

“Time is irreversible, I assume. I think the god can deal with what has happened, but not remove the source of the problems.”

“I got a do-over, though.”

“And who made that happen?”

“Right.”

It wasn’t the god of this world. The Inspector had done that. And she had called it the card up her sleeve. That’s not something you have an abundance of. It’s a one-shot move to turn the tables.

“History was changed, and a war-free future was beginning to be realized. If this isn’t in someone’s favor, there’s only one thing to do.”

“Oh boy...”

Summon someone, not as a hero, but as an enemy to the people, to save the people. It may sound ridiculous, but it wasn’t all that complicated. It is said that any human organization (a country, for example) needs a common enemy to bond together. What had the prolonged peace in this world brought?

That was an ironic question, though. The same could be said about Japan: did the Japanese people mentally grow through the past seven decades of peace? Well, even if I didn’t bring up extreme examples, I hear that, in most retail locations, the employees have a good relationship. They have a common enemy: the customers.

“That is extreme to another degree. You owe a sincere apology to every retail worker.”

“I am terribly sorry.”

“Mm. So the next person summoned this time is an enemy to humanity.”

“There still is the question of whether or not being reborn or transported here as a non-human species is possible.”

“I’m the precedent of that. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

That’s right. Here’s the woman who turned into a Dragon. And that’s more scary than Atsushi Nakajima’s “Sangetsuki.” In that story, it was only a tiger.

“Perhaps this person was convinced to stand up for the monsters oppressed in this world.”

“That’s ridiculous...ly probable.”

“Mm.”

It is just a difference in points of view. Goblins, and other monsters, were only nuisances in the eyes of humans. Naturally, they were hunted down and killed. But monsters were not created to become human prey. They had their own lives and the right to live them. Why were they hunted down, when all they wanted was to live their lives?

If humans had to eat them to survive, then it couldn’t be helped. Each species for their own. But did humans need the monster fur and fangs to survive? Were they only hunted to make human life more convenient? Did humans own this world?

“Those are arguments we hear all the time on Earth, just for animals instead of monsters.”

By conservationists and animal rights groups. I don’t think they’re wrong. If Earth had a heart, it might wish for humans not to exist. Humanity, like an ungrateful child, has only hurt our Mother Earth. Still...

“That, too, is merely a talking point of humans.”

Tiamat jumped in. I agreed. At the end of the day, humans are humans. Nothing more and nothing less. We can try speaking for the animals, but even then, it’s only human assumption. The same thing was happening in Noura too, I imagined.

“This isn’t a battle of humans against monsters.”

“Mm. Humans against the person controlling the monsters.”

We chuckled together. Of course, none of this was backed up by facts. Just a guess, based on prior knowledge and bias.

“Time to churn our brains, Eiji. How do we take care of this situation?”

I crossed my arms. We couldn’t leave it be. If war worsened, there would be countless casualties on both sides.

...There was no point in pretty words, though. I wasn’t concerned with casualties on the monsters’ side. Baze and Hieronymus were good friends of mine, but this was another matter entirely.

“First, we have to find the enemy’s headquarters.”

“To cut the head off?”

The dragon crooked her neck.

5.

“It’s not that we’re going to start a fight,” I answered as we watched the overjoyed residents of the city.

The torches were casting deformed shadows on the stone-paved roads. Before we knew it the sun had completely set, surrounding us with the dark of night. Still, the people showed no signs of settling down. In fact, the party raged even harder. I wondered if many of them would be able to get to work tomorrow. Perhaps they got PTO for hangovers.

“Mm.”

Tiamat’s response was short, probably because she knew exactly what I meant. Thanks, partner.

“There’s no point in winning that fight.”

Exactly. Why the god of this world summoned another person from our world, I didn’t know. Only god may have known. Literally. There was something I did know, though. Now that the god has summoned one, it didn’t make a difference to summon more. Even if we defeated the one who was summoned this time around, the god of this world would summon someone else. Our battles would never end.

“Besides, war is never better than peace.”

I tightened my fist. The hero had planted some seeds of destruction for this world. That much was indisputably true, and I couldn’t defend that. He had brought over something that should not have existed in this world yet. No choice of words would get him a decree of innocence. But no one could deny his achievement of defeating the Demon Lord and establishing an era of peace.

“Even if Shizuru the Hero destroys this world as a result, I will never condone summoning a Demon Lord to correct that course.”

“I mean, I’m happy you’re that passionate about my brother you’ve never met... But what are we going to do, specifically?”

Tiamat seemed a little embarrassed. A brother of hers might as well be a brother of mine.

“Talk.”

“Talk, huh? Wasn’t that how you were killed before?”

Yes, indeed-io. Totally taken off guard. My big mistake.

“I won’t fall for it again. Negotiations are what I’m good at, anyway.”

“I thought you were a lowly bureaucrat and not a crisis negotiator.”

Don't call me lowly!

I mean, it was true. I called myself that all the time, but it was annoying when someone else did it.

"I don't take care of the concerns of our city's valued citizens for my own enjoyment."

No one goes to the city clerk's office just to vent or anything. Precise answers and specific suggestions are always required of us.

Take questions about taxes, for example. That isn't something that I can ever answer 'don't worry about it' to, nor give them some sort of discount. So I'm left talking about how they can pay their taxes. Can they pay it in installments? How much of their income could they put towards it each month? That's the kind of discussion I have with people who come to me. If they still have trouble paying their taxes from poverty, I show them to an appropriate department.

We're not just there to let people vent, but to set up real solutions. That's my kind of talking.

"A little different from my kind of talk."

"Right."

Tiamat was a school counselor in Japan. According to her, the first priority of counseling is to listen. Specific solutions are not often expected of them. Lecturing is out of the question. It was completely different from bureaucratic discussions.

"So, what are you going to talk about?"

"How to coexist."

"That's a big one. Humans and monsters to coexist? You think we can do it?" Tiamat laughed.

It wasn't going to be easy. Humans and monsters coexist in many fantasy pieces without issue, but I had a good idea of how difficult that really was to achieve.

Monsters ate humans. As long as that remained true, cohabitation was impossible. Unless one or the other was completely caged or something. Of course, that was not coexistence, but the set up of owner and pet. There are zoos and bear farms in Japan, too; who could claim those setups to be coexistence? The difference in how we obtain nutrients was a wider divide than most imagine.

"Isn't it a little dismissive to give up on discourse without even trying?"

"That is true," Tiamat agreed.

Just because the enemy started a war, it didn't mean we had the option of giving up on all forms of contact. Brawling to the death was just too idiotic.

"We'll find their base and negotiate with their boss. I suppose that will be our angle."

"Yep."

Tiamat and I shrugged our shoulders. I thought we were contemplating peaceful plans like researching seafood and finding rice bran or a substitute for it. It just didn't seem like this world was willing to give us peace.

We decided that we would hunt down the surviving monster army. The day after the massive party in the city, I told as much to Earl Agamemnon, who was clearly hung over.

"They are powerful and multiply quickly. If we leave them be, they will soon regain their strength and attack again, as many times as it takes. In order to prevent that, we have to go for the head."

"Oh, my... To think that you all have Noura at your hearts, Sir Eiji..."

"Not particularly. Nations and borders don't hold that much importance to us. We are here to save people. That's it."

Whether they were from Noura or Azur didn't really matter. As a result, we were just going to end up helping Noura.

"Master Hermits..."

"That being said, we are unfamiliar with the land in Noura. It would be of great help if you could provide us with a guide. And any passes you can print would be a big, big help."

This (a little pushy) request was actually to give us a bit of ethos. I was technically an F-rank adventurer, so there was nothing suspicious about me traveling down the main roads for no reason. Since Noura was at war, all people would think was that I was here looking for mercenary work. I didn't think we would get lost too easily either, since we had Tiamat's DLC packs on our side.

On the other hand, if we could wave the Earl's figurative banner, and have his people accompany us, we could roam much freer. Use every connection you have. That's the Eiji style. I explained all of this to Earl Agamemnon, too. If we were to upset him and be rejected, that was fine by me. It was against my beliefs to use people through deception. If I was going to use them, I would disclose that fact up front.

"You would make for a poor politician, Sir Eiji," the Earl laughed.

Yep, I know. Already been assassinated once. No big deal.

"I understand your intentions. In that case, please allow my son to assist you in your journey."

With that, he introduced us to a young man named Ruey Agamemnon. He had spectacular red hair and a gentle face with a body built like a sable. He wasn't as feral as Baze, nor as neat as Hieronymus, but seemed like an honest man. About as tall as me, too. His stature was extraordinary for someone of this world.

Another looker! One more good-looking guy joins the party! Why am I being surrounded by these guys?! If I was a woman, I might have

enjoyed the situation like *Don't fight over me, boys! Teehee!* but I, unfortunately, am a man. I had no wife or children, but I did have a fiancée... albeit a dragon fiancée.

"Sir Eiji. I will serve you to the best of my abilities!"

Ruey straightened his back. Oh boy. What a refreshing young man.

"Thank you, Lord Ruey."

"Please. Just call me Ruey."

Why are you blushing, Ruey? People might get the wrong idea.

I felt a pat on my shoulder, and turned around to find Tiamat in her human form. Giving me a thumb's up. I'm sorry. I didn't have a clue what she meant by that gesture. What were you expecting of me, mi amor?

6.

We ended up parting with the Murdock troupe at Mostail. We couldn't very well keep traveling leisurely on a performance tour. I was going to miss all of them after spending all day every day with them for the past month, but it couldn't be helped.

"We part alive. We shall meet again, if luck be on our side."

Mister Murdock extended his right hand, and I firmly took it.

"Yes, we shall."

We were both grown men, so neither of us cried. I held back the heat welling in my eyes. From the corner of them, I could see Eily and Hieronymus saying their goodbyes. She was embracing him with tears falling down her cheeks. Woah. Lord Hieronymus?

You didn't cross the line, did you?

When we met up again, it wasn't going to be funny if Eily was holding a baby in her arms, much less one with cat ears and a tail.

"And so our paths have parted. When will the sun rise to the day we meet again?" the elder narrated. Good.

Mister Storyteller, I hope you never change. Take care, old man.

Now we didn't have much time to waste. We departed Mostail when it was still early in the morning. We were already a night behind. Even though we were traveling lighter than them, it was possible that there was already an unrecoverable distance between us. However, we had already traveled here, so we didn't need to pack anything new. And Ruey was a warrior before he was the earl's sun, so he only packed the essentials. Once we said our farewells, our steps were light.

"Can you track them, Lord Baze?"

"No probs. With this many tracks, I don't even need to sniff."

What a reassuring Fenrir. We estimated that there were one or two thousand surviving monsters. If such a large group traveled together, they would naturally leave a trail. Not just tracks, but traces of food and feces, too. There were more than a few members in their party, and it was impossible to completely cover their tracks.

“The thing is, they’re in a pretty big rush.”

“You can tell that much?”

“Their strides. Humans have longer strides when they run too, don’t they?”

“Oh, I see.”

I understood, looking at the tracks Baze was pointing at that most likely belonged to goblins. They were shorter than humans, and naturally had shorter strides than us. However, the tracks left behind were paced like a human jogging.

“They were sprinting, most likely,” said Tiamat.

“They wouldn’t last long, then,” Hieronymus answered.

I agreed. Goblins, humans, or any other bipedal species aren’t really made for running, due to air resistance. Actually, quadrupeds keep their body as low to the ground as possible when they run in order to prevent as much resistance as possible. Which was also why bullet trains are bullet-shaped. Higher resistance means more energy expended. That’s why humans can’t sprint for long. Same with monsters, I assumed.

“Suppose they fled the battleground as fast as they could,” said Tiamat.

“Seems plausible.”

Come to think of it, it didn’t seem feasible for them to travel all the way from their home base to attack Mostail. They should have some sort of base nearby, whether they set it up or conquered an existing settlement. The monsters had a general that came up with attacking Noura’s main port of trade. They would certainly have employed basic strategies like that.

“Why are my good ideas always tardy?”

I sighed. Pretty pathetic, if I do say so myself.

“That’s because you’re neither a military man nor a warrior, Eiji. You’ve lived your whole life without interacting with political or military strategy. It wouldn’t make any sense at all if you were suddenly a strategic genius after coming to this world.”

Tiamat consoled me. She was absolutely right. I was just a little bureaucrat, with no experience in politics or war. I had lived a peaceful life, without so much as being called in during a natural disaster. On the other hand, we were in a predicament where we couldn’t get away with ‘I never learned that, sorry.’

“It could be an ambush.”

“Mm. Seems plausible.”

The obvious retreat, the obvious track, and most likely a base ahead of us. A trap? Set up to lure in and decimate Earl Agamemnon’s army following their tracks. By numbers alone, there were more than a thousand left of the monster army, and less than five hundred of the earl’s men. It was no contest. It wasn’t too far-fetched to think that the monsters would try to pull us into their home field, rather than fight us out in the open where they had a disadvantage.

“It could be dangerous to pursue any further,” Ruey said, carefully.

“Yep,” I agreed.

One’s thoughtlessness and the preference for flashiness is usually proportional. Ruey was the only one in our party with an expertise in military strategy. If I wasn’t going to honor his opinion, there would have been no point in bringing him along.

“Shall I advance alone and scout it out?” Hieronymus suggested.

After a moment, I shook my head. If our enemy was a gang of bandits or something, one Cait Sith could take care of them. This time, though, they were a vicious monster army. They could spot him even if he tried to conceal his presence. If they did, he could be captured and even killed. I couldn’t take that risk.

“Let’s be careful. Lord Hieronymus, this time, we should look before we jump.”

There could come a time where we would have to gamble. No, there definitely would be such a time, but that wasn’t now. There was nothing to gain from taking a risk here.

“Our plan isn’t to attack them, anyway. We just need to follow them slowly and carefully so as to not lose their tracks,” Tiamat concluded.

There was no need to catch up to them and finish them off. There was no need to fight at all, in fact. The monsters were undoubtedly headed back to their home base. It would have been stupid to jump right into the traps they set to protect against follow-up attacks. So we continued following them.

Two days had passed when we came upon the abandoned base of the monster army, where we had expected them to ambush us.

“No trap, and not a soul to be found. What’s going on?” said Baze, after doing a lap through the place.

In the sudden clearing in the forest, a poorly constructed fort (most likely by goblins and orcs) stood on its lonesome.

“I... get it... That’s what happened...”

Ruey stood still, defeated.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sir Eiji. I am so sorry. They got us good.”

Of course, I had no idea what he was talking about. Was it that bad for us that there were no monsters here?

"It's that bad, Eiji. Hieronymus and I took a little walk just now."

"Their tracks can be found in every direction, making it difficult for us to tell which directions they retreated in. Isn't that so, Lady Tiamat?"

Ruey finished Tiamat's thought, as she returned with an exasperated expression. He was only double checking.

"Mm. Wool over our eyes."

"What? What do you mean, Tia?"

"My father once told me... just making the enemy consider a trap can disrupt their decision making."

Ruey was the one who answered me. Expecting an ambush, we followed the trail slowly. That was the monsters' trap all along. In that time, they set up the place to conceal the direction they took, making for a successful escape. Our carefulness gave the enemy enough time to do it. If I had at least taken Hieronymus' suggestion for him to scout out ahead, we could have avoided this situation. It was all too late, though.

"We leaned too far over the edge to look before we jumped, and fell right in. They won this round of mind games, Eiji. Hands down," Tiamat said.

"What a mess..."

7.

We couldn't spend all our time lamenting our loss. If it meant that our situation would improve, I would happily dance the Para Para or the Lambada, but that would be totally pointless.

"The former, by the way, is a disco dance born in Japan during the late 1980s; the latter was born in South America. They were both popular around the same time, but many discos at the time banned the dances for being too provocative."

Thanks for the detailed explanation, Tiamat. But why was she waving me over? I can't dance the Lambada.

"You just said you would. What a filthy liar you are."

"Only if it would... Sorry. I lied. I can't dance the Lambada or the Para Para. Please have mercy on my soul."

I begged desperately, yet self-deprecatingly. I mean, it kind of felt like Tiamat would pull all sorts of tricks and solve our problem just to make me do the dance. No? Just me?

"Hm. Think about what you did."

What a generous gesture of forgiveness. Damn it. Just you watch, one of these days I will make her rue this moment!

“Right. Ruey-rue-rue.”

“Errrrrk!”

“Tracks lead in every direction except due west, where we came in from.”

Disregarding our stupid conversation, Ruey was contemplating our next move, holding a map open.

“The discussion as to which tracks are real may be pointless, Lord Ruey. We have no way of discerning whether they plan to rendezvous somewhere or plan for each team to return of their own merit.”

Hieronymus was the one discussing with him. So sorry. I really am the useless one.

“There are the most tracks headed east, out of the bunch. That’s their main party.”

Even Baze sounded more reserved than normal. We couldn’t help but be more trepidatious after falling for their trap once.

“It could be a mislead to make us think so, or it could really be the direction they went in.”

Ruey shrugged. Someone once said that the most effective traps are set on your opponent’s mind. Determined not to fall for it again, we were being timid. Even though we knew that the enemy did this to buy time, we hesitated to take swift action.

“It would be a foolish decision for us to split up, too,” said Tiamat.

“Yep.”

Since I had no combat skills, I would pair up with Tiamat. Ruey would partner with Baze, and Hieronymus, who had smarts and situational awareness, would go solo. We could have split into three, but what was the point of breaking up our already meager force? Once we split up, it wouldn’t be easy to make contact with each other, either.

“Thought Speech can only go about a kilometer, max,” Tiamat added.

Maybe we could use it while we were in a town, but that was about it.

“Oh.”

“Light bulb, Eiji?”

“Let’s go in the direction with the least amount of tracks.”

“How come?”

“Because it’s probably not their biggest party.”

I needed to explain myself. If we try to catch their main party, we would be disappointed if we were wrong. Then, why not go in expecting one of the decoy parties?

“You go down the wrong path first in dungeons too. There could be treasure chests at the end.”

Stick to the correct path, and you might not get a chance to crawl

that dungeon again. I wouldn't want to leave a collectible behind.

"In video games, maybe."

"Right. There's no reason to go the long way in real life. But we don't know the right path, anyway."

It wasn't important for us to pick the right path. No matter which set of tracks we followed, there would be monsters at the end of them. And those monsters would eventually return to their home base or meet up with the main party.

"And, maybe if they're really small in numbers, we could capture them and make them talk, I think."

A monster put in charge to lead a separate party could be a higher-up in their army. I didn't want to get ahead of ourselves, but that monster could very well have some information.

"Hm... Not a bad idea, Lord Eiji."

Hieronymus, who had been pondering my suggestion, cracked a grin. Beside him, Ruey gave a big nod.

With Baze back in Fenrir mode leading the pack, we restarted our tracking. Baze guessed that we were following a group of fifty or so, but couldn't make out an accurate number since many of the tracks were covered or planted.

"An attempt to throw us for a loop. They have that much intelligence, at least. We mustn't underestimate them."

"Indeed."

Tiamat and Hieronymus poofed out of their human forms. Since we weren't in a town, there was almost no point in staying human. It seemed more beneficial to be ready to use their full power, rather than be a little more concealed.

We were headed south, generally speaking. Tiamat was beside me, as Ruey led our party and Hieronymus remained rearguard.

"I wonder how much distance they've put between us."

"Not sure. Most likely two or three days' worth," Tiamat answered.

With some simple math, that's about sixty to ninety kilometers. Although, since we weren't traveling along a road but through the woods with poor visibility and uneven ground, I doubted that said distance was unrecoverable. Especially when there were so many more of them than us. There was no reason for their party to travel faster than us.

"If we keep going in this direction, though, we may be in for a little bit of trouble," Ruey said, holding the map in his left hand.

We were in the woods as we spoke, but were coming up on a travel road if we kept heading south. Naturally, there were also towns and villages in that direction. I couldn't predict whether or not the monsters would simply travel past any settlement. Even if they tried

to, the residents of those settlements could overreact. Would they choose fight or flight? The latter would be all right, but there would be bloodshed with the former.

“Definitely want to avoid that.”

“When you say things like that...”

“Boss Man. I smell blood in the air.”

Baze gave a sharp warning, interrupting Tiamat.

“See. Nice tee-up.”

“My fault?! Was that my fault?!”

“No time to goof around. Your call, Boss Man.”

Baze was right. I made a snap decision.

“Let’s catch up to the source, quick. Can you go ahead, Tia? Lord Baze?”

“No. It would be too dangerous to divide us here,” said Tiamat.

“But going as fast I can isn’t quick enough.”

“Forget it. Boss Man. Ruey. Hop on.”

“Okay.”

I felt like I would have been scorned for turning him down, so I climbed onto Baze’s back... with Ruey’s help. There was plenty of room on the Fenrir’s back, even with two grown men on it. In fact, his fluffy fur was very comfortable. Tiamat’s scales were cold, and not fluffy at all. And she wasn’t big enough for me to ride on her back.

“Let’s go. Hold on tight.”

With a kick off of the ground, Baze accelerated. It was fast. And scary! There was no way I could sit up anymore. I held on to Baze with all of my limbs. He was sprinting in the woods, weaving through the trees. A roller coaster would have been a little less thrilling than this.

I kept my face down too, to keep any branches from flying into my eyes. Then Ruey covered me, protecting me with his own body. I was grateful, but what did that say about my role in the party?

The air roared passed us. As my vision closed in, I spotted Tiamat and Hieronymus. The dragon princess was flying very low and very fast, while the feline gentleman ran like a predator on the savannah. Right. Being on Baze’s back seemed like the safest option, after all.

8.

We came to the crime scene within minutes. The goblins were attacking a town. While some armored residents, perhaps a town watch, were fighting them back, they were clearly losing. Their numbers were too different to begin with. Against the twenty or so residents, there were nearly one hundred goblins. They didn’t stand a chance.

“Tia!”

“Mm. Lowest setting to not destroy the town, got it.”

Still flying low to the ground, Tiamat opened her mouth. Then a beam of light swiped through the air with a roar. Her Laser Breath. A dozen goblins evaporated without so much as a scream.

Dumbfounded, the humans and monsters pause their brawl. While the pause only lasted long enough for a few grains of sand to fall in an hourglass, that’s all Baze and Hieronymus needed.

Ruey jumped off with me in his arms, and the Fenrir sped up faster and ran straight through the group of monsters. A beat later the heads of those goblins flew off, setting off fountains of blood. What was he, Blade Liger? Where was his blade, anyway? Besides, I thought he was a wolf, not a mix of a lion and a tiger.

“Lord Baze puts on quite the show.”

Hieronymus grinned like a mad cat. He waved his right front paw in a swish. That’s all it took for the goblins to turn their weapons against each other. The sudden betrayal sent the enemy battalion in a tizzy, naturally. Hieronymus’ spells were pretty nasty too. Seizing that opportunity, Ruey charged into battle, swinging his sword left and right.

“We came to help! Now’s our chance! Fight back!” he shouted.

The town’s warriors shifted from hopeless, to astonished, and now overjoyed.

With powerful roars, they attacked with renewed vitality. The battle was decided right there. Without putting up much of a fight, the goblins were taken out one by one. It was a matter of time before they were all killed. However, leaving every last one of them dead wasn’t too good for us. We needed to gain some information. Since we could no longer follow the party back to home base, we couldn’t let that information slip away.

“That looks like the leader over there. Let’s take him alive.”

Tiamat, who had been standing beside me, flapped her wings and went. I always wondered how she could fly with those little wings. I don’t think the laws of aviation applied to her.

She went directly to the large goblin she pointed out. A boss goblin, goblin chief, or the like. Dodging the slashes of its sword (dealt with an off-key scream), Tiamat grabbed the goblin by its neck and threw it high up in the air like a volleyball. Of course, a goblin couldn’t fly like a dragon could. It started to descend according to gravity. Tiamat caught the goblin with her tail, and tossed it right back into the air again.

I realized what this was. I read it in a comic book once. It’s the thing brown bears do to their prey to make it completely give up on resisting. After three or four tosses, the goblin boss sulked powerlessly.

She didn't kill it, did she?

As Tiamat was toying with it, the rest of the goblins were annihilated. I doubted that all of them were killed, though. Since their boss was being toyed with, the goblins were cowering, completely in retreat mode. A few goblins weren't too much of a threat to a town though. The town watch or an adventurer could take care of them.

"Looks like that's a wrap."

Tiamat came back, dragging the dizzied goblin boss. What a wild girl she was.

"Let's tie him up, I guess."

I didn't expect the goblin to fight back anymore, but we couldn't very well leave him to his own volition. I didn't know any fancy knots, but I figured if I just tangled him up with the rope... That's when I realized that Mister Donkey wasn't with us! He had all of my stuff! Right. We had left him behind when we hopped onto Baze.

"What am I going to do, Tia... Donkey gone..."

"You're a grown man, don't cry. It's pathetic."

"But..."

Mister Donkey had all of my things, including my wallet, food, and water. I'd lost everything.

"He's headed our way at his leisure. Now that we've caught our breath, Baze or Hieronymus can go get him."

"For real?! He's not a lost little donkey?!"

"He can handle himself twice as much as you can, Eiji. Don't worry."

I didn't know about those numbers. Only a double of me was still pretty bad.

I turned around to see someone running toward us from the town. It was an old, skinny man, most likely the mayor. He greeted Ruey, full of gratitude. He must have thought that Ruey was our leader. I get it; I would have thought the same!

Assuming that Ruey would explain our situation for us, I went back to keeping an eye on the goblin. Oh, I did have my shortsword drawn from my belt, by the way. I didn't think I'd hit anything if I swung it, but keeping a weapon drawn would deter the goblin from putting up a fight.

There seemed to be a lot of injuries to the people of the town too, as Hieronymus was over there casting healing spells. He really was a jack of all trades. No wonder girls liked him. Soon the man from the town was brought to us by Ruey.

"Master Hermit. Thank you for saving our town from certain death."

He dove to the ground. Not kneeling, but completely flat on the ground.

“Please, stand up. Of course we would help anyone being attacked by monsters. Anybody would, Hermit or human.”

I sheathed my shortsword and gave him a smile. I had passed on the duty of goblin-watch to Ruey. Baze walked past us, apparently to go get the donkey.

Godspeed, good man! That donkey has everything of mine!

As I thought of those things, I helped the man up. There were rushed introductions. His name was Dolitos, the mayor of the town of Wulds, which was about a tenth of the size of Mostail. I thought that would make Wulds a village, but in this world, the population of a settlement didn't determine its classification. If the people called their settlement a town, it was a town. With how small it was, of course, there was no army there.

Dolitos was another representative, appointed by the noble that owned these lands. If I delved into this representative system it would get really complicated, so the short version is that powerful people in a village or town are usually the ones appointed for the job. So, most of the time, a representative was also the mayor.

What the town had was a town watch. Sometimes adventurers would join in, but there was no one officially trained in a military or specialized in strategy. They were at a level where they might have been able to deal with goblins of the same number as them.

The total number of town watch members and adventurers in Wulds was only sixteen. They wouldn't have stood a chance against a horde of a hundred goblins. There was no option to run, either, as their town was being attacked. Mister Dolitos had resigned himself to death, too. That's when we came in.

“Lord Eiji. Everyone has been treated. Fortunately, no one was embraced by death.”

No deaths. That was the best news we could get. I remember seeing some people with very serious injuries, but Hieronymus took care of them.

“That's great. Then we just have to make him talk and tell us where their home base is.”

“Indeed.”

“On the other hand, we are a bit worn out. I think we can wait 'til tomorrow to restart our chase,” Tiamat said.

I agreed. Since we came upon a town, I certainly wanted to sleep in a bed. A little expectantly, I glanced at Mister Dolitos.

“In that case, please stay in our town.”

He returned a generous smile to us.

Having safely reunited with Mister Donkey, we were going to spend the night in Wulds. I was a little worried that this small town wouldn't have an inn, but to my surprise, we were invited to stay in the mayor's manor. The VIP treatment.

With food and booze, it was a party. He had even brought out the pretty ladies to serve us. Which was definitely unnecessary. I had a fiancée, and the very lady was sitting next to me. Under the guise of her human shell, she was a dragon. If I dared cheat on her, she could very well eat me raw. Head first. Crunch crunch. Without even any seasonings.

In any case, the safe bet was to redirect that kind of service to Ruey. I stuck to conversing with Mister Dolitos.

"I must confess, I don't know how to act in such an extravagant welcome, Mister Dolitos."

"Please, Sir Eiji. You've already refused a reward. At least let us do this much, for our sake."

That being said, I wasn't going to rob this not-so-affluent town of any money. Especially when the battle earlier had caused some damage. There were no deaths, but fixing up fences, buildings, and farms could be pricey. No one in his position should be handing off a small fortune to some adventurers who dropped by.

"I appreciate the offer, but please mind your own time. Winter is fast approaching, and you can't have enough food stocked."

If he gave us too much food, they might struggle to make it through winter. In fact, no rice was served to us. As a town by a forest, I imagined that they hunted for their food a lot. With lots of meat on the table, their main source of food was rye bread. Dry, crumbling rye bread. Like the ones we packed on our travels. When that sort of thing is served, I couldn't help but think that they didn't yield much rice that year.

"Actually, we don't grow rice in Wulds," Mister Dolitos smiled, having picked up something from my expression.

That was surprising. This was our first meeting with non-rice-eaters.

"I see. Everyone I've met on my journey ate rice, so I assumed that was the norm."

"We buy rice from traveling merchants when they bring it, but they're not on a schedule. We stick to these."

Tearing off a piece of the rye bread with his teeth, he washed it down with a wine-like liquor. Good thing he had healthy teeth and jaw.

"Is there a reason why you don't grow rice? I think it's a very efficient crop."

"We don't get much water. Our wells are enough for us to get by,

but not nearly enough to manage rice fields.”

“Really?”

I raised my brow, but also understood. There had been several rivers and springs in the forest we passed through. It must have been my modern mind that gave me the idea of digging a canal from one of those water sources. That would be a major project. Not something they could start at the drop of the hat, and they would need some knowledge of hydrological engineering.

“So that’s why you grow rye?”

“Before my time, we used to grow wheat, but rye grows in worse soil, at the end of the day.”

With a nod, I glanced at Tiamat to request an explanation. I didn’t know the difference between growing rye and wheat.

“Both rye and wheat are harvested from the same field. Since it was similar to wheat, the rye plants were left untrimmed. Then, the ones most similar to wheat continued to survive. Over dozens of generations, rye evolved to become similar to wheat.”

And, since rye plants were weeds to begin with, they can apparently grow in soil too weak to grow wheat in. Rye was amazing! Talk about an underdog.

“Long ago, when the entire world was burned to ash by the Demon Lord, our hero gave us rice. However, when our ancestors were lost, having discovered that our land was unfit for growing rice, they found a grain sprouting in the burnt field. Rye.”

I hadn’t heard of this tale before. So that was the background for my brother-in-law popularizing rice. He didn’t just bring over Kirara 397 for his personal preference. Now, co-ed bathing was definitely introduced only for his personal interest. He was a teenage boy, after all.

“Now it makes sense. Your fighters are healthy because you don’t constantly eat rice.”

With that, I told him of the beriberi epidemic in Azur. Not to scare him, but to basically illustrate that everything should be had in moderation.

“Mm. Brumotactillophobia is bad for you.”

Tiamat jumped in for the assist. But what was with the technical language? Mister Dolitos was staring back at us blankly. I tried to rephrase it, but I couldn’t come up with an alternative. This was the fear of one’s food touching another kind of food. Eating one dish at a time at a meal is considered rude in Japan, and it really didn’t improve one’s health either.

“AKA being an isolationist.”

“Right. If you knew the layman’s term, I wish you would have opened with it.”

“But did you know the layman’s term?”

“Touché.”

I’d never heard of the non-technical term.

“In any case, overeating is not healthy. I see,” Mister Dolitos laughed after watching our comedy routine. We are the beloved Hermits. Damn it.

Wulds was a small town, but they had a jail. Of course they did, I should say. Any settlement needs a facility to keep criminals captive. This world wasn’t so la-la to say that there were no criminals in a small town.

A shadow approached said jail. It was the dead of night after the sun had completely set. The figure was in all-black, hiding their face with a mask. Noticing the figure, the goblin leader approached the bars of his cell. A rescue, he must have thought.

Just as he was about to cry in glee, the figure in black stopped him by holding up a single finger of his left hand in front of his face. Catching the drift, the goblin covered his mouth with his hands. The next moment, the figure’s right hand seemed to blur. With the goblin’s hands still where the mouth used to be, his head fell to the floor of the jail cell with a ludicrously light note.

With a glance at the pitiful goblin, the figure in black turned to leave... and froze, as they locked eyes with me, who had been watching this event unfold. This fly on the wall was found out.

The figure acted quickly. They sprinted without a word, a charred dagger flashing in their hand. The weapon they just used to kill the goblin. The figure charged me, trying to kill me, too. We were just a few steps apart. I had no way to dodge the attack.

Still, the attacker’s blade never reached me. After a whish, the figure in black backflipped. More accurately, Tiamat’s tail slammed into their face straight-on, flipping the figure and dropping them on the ground headfirst.

The nightscape shifted as the rest of my party emerged. Ruey rushed over and tied the figure behind their back after making sure that they hadn’t been killed.

“Came to tie up loose ends. Rather thorough of them,” Hieronymus chuckled, his mustaches dancing.

It was a simple trick when it came down to it. We had been concealing ourselves with his spell. Invisibility, he called it. We went through the trouble because the goblin we had captured was too unyielding. He gave up no information and didn’t fold to any of Baze’s threats, despite the fact that, accordingly, monsters usually can’t disobey a creature above them.

Guessing that the goblin was confident of an incoming rescue, we

set out a trap. We thought that the goblin would finally break if his rescue team was captured too. However, the one who appeared wasn't a rescuer but an assassin. I couldn't help but move to try and stop the act, which caused the spell on me to break and our eyes to meet. I had no excuse for myself.

"We simply have a dark elf prisoner instead of a goblin one now. This one may be a little more reasonable," Tiamat said, as if to reconcile my mistake.

Ruey tore off the assassin's mask, revealing bright silver hair that flowed in the wind.

10.

"Grr! Kill me!"

The dark elf glared at us as she was bound by Ruey. Her skin was as black as night, contrasting her silver hair. She had onyx irises in her elongated eyes. She was ridiculously beautiful. That being said, I never thought I'd hear that line in real life. Please. That made it sound like we're the bad guys.

"Now, now. Don't get yourself excited."

I tried the understanding approach.

"Don't touch me! You filthy human!"

I didn't touch her, nor did I even try to. What a false accusation. This was her reaction for me taking a step towards her? She was treating me like some sort of virus. What was she, five?

I wasn't too immature as to become enraged at that poor excuse of an insult, but I had to acknowledge the difficulty level of our negotiations to come. She had no intention of hearing out anything we had to say. That being said, if I went and said something like 'I have no tongue to speak to you with!' there would be no negotiations to speak of.

"I have no intention of torturing a prisoner of mine, but I don't appreciate the insults. We may be standing on opposite sides of the matter, but I don't think any civilized person would insult their opponent for that. What do you think?"

"Wha...?!"

The dark elf flapped her mouth after I said this to her face. Hm. Susceptible to common sense, it seemed. Then there was room for discourse. There are people in this world that counter logic with rage. You can't negotiate rationally with those people, but only appeal to their emotions. We were fortunate that this dark elf was not one of them.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Eiji."

"...Cielz," the prisoner answered after enough time passed for light

to travel three million kilometers.

She must have had quite the internal conflict. I didn't mock her in any way, of course. I only wore a gentle smile and made a suggestion.

"Let's talk somewhere else. No one can feel comfortable talking next to a dead body."

Inside the manor, it was as silent as... well, that wasn't a good start to the simile. In the hall where the party was hosted, a bunch of drunks were snoring in a dog pile. A horrendous display of naivety.

"Where are you headed, Sir Eiji?"

Mister Dolitos, who was still awake, approached us. Good. With a brief summary of the event, I explained that we were going to ask our prisoner some questions, and asked him to take care of our ex-prisoner's body. Everyone would surely be surprised to find a dead goblin there in the morning.

"Understood. I'll tend to it immediately."

Mister Dolitos agreed, albeit surprised. He kicked one of the town's watchmen to wake him up. Kick. Kick. What a hostile work environment. Chuckling, we entered the room provided to us. To be accurate, it was Tiamat and I's room.

Come to think of it, I had spent most of my time in this world sharing a room with her. I mean, there was nothing wrong with an engaged couple sharing a room, but perhaps there was something wrong about us not having acted like it at all. I was over two months into celibate life. Since this hadn't really bothered me, I must have been more beta than I thought.

"Now, we actually only have one question for you, Miss Cielz," I said, sitting down on the bed.

Miss Cielz still had her hands tied behind her back. Even though my wild friends had my back, I couldn't very well untie her in this situation. The dark elf stared back from her seat.

"You have a leader, don't you? We would like to meet them. Will you tell us where they are?"

I went straight to the point. In truth, we weren't sure that there was such a being as a Demon Lord. However, it just wasn't feasible for stray monsters to act that organized. To split up their army and execute a coordinated retreat? No one without experience in war would have come up with that, to be honest.

And it probably wasn't a coincidence that the goblins attacked the town either. It must have been one of their strategies to slow down the trailing army, with even someone to keep an eye on the battle to keep it somewhat under control. I shuddered, realizing how thorough they were.

"...And then what, human?"

Miss Cielz answered with a question after another long pause. A natural question.

“I wanted to speak with them.”

“About?”

“Things that have happened. Things that will happen,” I said, in a slightly showboaty way.

The dark elf wore a thin scowl.

“Humans and the Dark Side speaking of the future? Ludicrous.”

A full-blown mocking tone. Perhaps the divide between us was wider than I’d thought.

“So much so?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten how humans have treated us.”

She glared at me. Hmm. I never knew that to begin with.

“My apologies. I am a Hermit, and don’t know much about the turmoil of this world.”

I intentionally used my title because our conversation wasn’t going anywhere. Until this point, people had usually reacted to the title of Hermit. I was expecting a similar reaction here.

“Hermit?! You accursed Hermits!”

Miss Cielz’s reaction, however, was the opposite of what I had expected. She stomped the ground, widened her eyes, and enraged like she was going to bite me. In fact, if Ruey hadn’t kept her restrained, she would have definitely attacked me. And literally bit me, since her hands were tied.

“You Hermits! Who decimated us nearly to extinction a hundred and fifty years ago?! What could you possibly have to say now?!”

Oh. I got it now. The Demon Lord was vanquished by Shizuru, the hero. When he did, he could not have just gotten rid of the Demon Lord, isolated. The Demon Lord’s henchmen/women must have been destroyed too, or at least nearly destroyed. Guessing from the context clues I had so far, Miss Cielz and the other dark elves were on the Demon Lord’s side. Of course she was holding a grudge. And the hero was a Hermit too.

Oops. I really messed up, bad. I should have known that not everyone would be welcoming of Hermits with open arms. That was a no brainer, and it still slipped my mind. Those Isekai fantasies are the only worlds in which affirmation is given unconditionally. I had made a similar mistake in the past with Tiamat too. I hadn’t learned anything from my mistake. I was pathetic.

“Hm. That may be true, but who are the dark elves to play the victim? Nearly to extinction? Who massacred all of the elves in this world, again?”

Tiamat came in with this sarcastic question. She had come to my rescue after I had fallen silent. I shot my trusty partner a quick glance.

She gave me a little nod.

“...”

Miss Cielz had no response.

“I’m not blaming you for it. Both sides are at fault. I only mentioned it to prove the stupidity of war.”

Still in her dragon form, she managed to shrug. In an attempt to destroy the world, the Demon Lord had made many species extinct. Erased many nations from the world map. Then, a Hermit appeared. Shizuru, the hero, stood in the way of the Demon Lord’s army in order to save humanity.

By the time the human army he led had vanquished the Demon Lord, both the Demon Lord’s army and the human army had suffered much. Most of the world had turned to ash. In the century and a half since then, humans managed to regain this much prosperity.

That’s what Tiamat explained to me, and gave me a look that said ‘I bought you time, now wrap up the negotiation.’ Got it. I didn’t fumble that ball with writing on it.

“Miss Cielz... We don’t want to recreate the war of old. I want to speak with your leader in order to prevent such an event from happening again.”

I stared directly into her pitch-black eyes. I was going to make it or break it.

The Demon Lord's a Highschooler!

1.

"I apologize if I've offended you," I said to Miss Cielz.

Even if what Tiamat had said was logical, it was also true that I had spoken carelessly. Being stubborn and refusing to apologize wouldn't do me any good here.

"At this point, I still think there is time to resolve things with discourse. Matters haven't expanded beyond Noura yet."

As time would go on, casualties would grow. Along with that, the room for negotiation or reaching an understanding would rapidly shrink. Then it would be too late. All that would be left is a brawl to the death between humans and monsters. And this time, there would be no hero to save humanity. I didn't know how the god on-site planned to resolve the matter, but I doubted that it would summon yet another hero.

"..."

Miss Cielz stared back at me with skepticism. She seemed unsure of what I meant. To her, Hermits were enemies. It was natural for her to struggle to understand when a Hermit sounded like he was willing to negotiate.

"Or would you still prefer an encore of what happened a hundred and fifty years ago? This time, both sides may be wiped out."

I felt like I was drilling in the same point a little too hard, but I had no other cards to play. I couldn't demand a surrender with the threat of a powerful military nor oppress them with overwhelming financial control. As an average joe with no cheat codes to speak of, all I could do was speak to her sense of reason with sincerity.

"...I don't."

"You don't. I don't either. Because of that, I believe that we have at least one chance for a conversation."

"You want an audience with our ruler?"

"I do."

"But I'm just a bottom-rank soldier."

The dark elf smirked. Combined with her black skin and black eyes, her expression looked extremely sinister. However, even my dull brain could pick up that both her claim and her attitude were an act. I couldn't believe that a private would have the authority to kill the leader of one of their battalions.

"In that case, you can simply take us to your headquarters."

"..."

"If that will put you in danger, Miss Cielz, you only have to tell us where it is."

I didn't say anything about her act. I found no pleasure in pointing out the shortcomings of others, and I would gain nothing from calling her out on her lie in this situation. I didn't want to trick or kill the Demon Lord, after all.

"...You won't chide me for my dishonesty?"

"We're asking for an audience with the leader of a group that opposes us. I don't expect to be welcomed with open arms."

"...You are a strange man, Eiji."

Miss Cielz smiled. Yep, I thought she was much more charming with a smile than a frown. I returned the smile.

"So? Make a decision already. Are you going to take us there or not?" Tiamat interjected, rather displeased.

Oh? Could it be? Was she jealous? How cute. I glanced at Tiamat with a self-satisfied grin, when, smack!

"Aghhh!"

Out of nowhere, a dragon's tail struck the top of my foot.

Five days had passed since we said our goodbyes to Mister Dolitos and the city of Wulds and started traveling eastbound. We went in and out of the forest and the travel road. We carried on, following Miss Cielz's navigation through the obviously roundabout route. Just when I was beginning to worry about how little food we had left on Mister Donkey, we came to a clearing with a stronghold in the distance.

"...The abandoned castle of Gannes..." Ruey uttered softly.

"You know this place?" I asked.

"Only through rumors. The Demon Lord annihilated many nations and cities. The city-state of Gannes was one of them."

That was over a hundred and fifty years ago. No accurate records were kept, and those who survived to see it happen were long gone now. Apparently no one even knew its accurate location until now. Still, Ruey knew of the city-state because it was located within the current Noura territory.

"It all happened when a single rat appeared in the castle one day. I was told that no one in the castle nor the city survived the night."

Ruey rubbed his neck as if to calm his goosebumps. That sounded just like a scary story. And not a good one.

"If not a single person survived, I wonder who told that story."

I shrugged. Scary stories with impossible premises aren't hard to find. For example, the story of a female ghost that appears in the Tsukioka hot springs in Niigata prefecture was once described in a

book by the (now deceased) paranormal researcher Iwao Nikura.

Apparently the ghost was named Michi, and she was from the Edo period. She was a servant at Echigoya, a supplier of goods for merchant ships during the time. She fell in love with the heir of the business, Seitaro. Of course, a servant and the soon-to-be-owner of a large business lived in different worlds. Everyone around them furiously opposed their union, naturally.

At their wits' end, Shintaro and Michi eloped, hand-in-hand. After drifting through town after town, they finally arrived at Tsukioka hot springs. By that time, they had used up all of the money they had left. They were struggling to come up with each meal. Then Shintaro fell ill, and Michi was not in much better health herself. In the end, they chose the unthinkable.

With an oath to reunite in nirvana, they chose to commit shinju, or double suicide. But, even after death, they didn't end up together. While Shintaro's body was taken by his family that ran the goods-supply business and ceremoniously buried, Michi's body was left ignored. In fact, her body was stomped on, spat on, and abandoned at the side of a road.

Who could blame her for holding a grudge? Accordingly, Michi's spirit materializes out of her passion for Shintaro and her hatred for those who tore them apart.

"And that's the story. What do you think, Tia?"

"A run-of-the-mill ghost story. Nothing seemed particularly noteworthy, maybe other than the overly specific background information. But isn't that true for most ghost stories?"

"Even with your intellect, Tia, you didn't pick up on the lies of this ghost story?"

"Lies?"

"Yep. The first lie is that no one used the word 'shinju' after the mid-Edo period."

The use of another Japanese word by the same meaning, 'aitajini,' was strictly enforced from that point on by the orders of Yoshimune, the eighth shogun. The word 'shinju,' on the other hand, was eradicated from public records from that point on.

The word 'shinju' is comprised of kanji that, when combined, become a kanji that means 'loyalty.' The top theory for explaining the shogun's decision was that he really didn't like having the kanji for loyalty broken up like that, but the verdict is still out.

"Hm. Then that ghost must have lived before Yoshimune."

"That's right, Tia. And that's where the other lie comes in."

Tsukioka hot springs did not exist on this planet before the Kyoho years of the Edo period (1716-1736) when Yoshimune ruled. It was in a quiet slumber deep below the ground. It wasn't discovered until

1918, when a certain oil company struck it by coincidence during a boring attempt. In other words, it's not some hidden hot spring that emerged out of nature.

"That means people only started living there after that."

"That's what happened. Tsukioka hot springs was just a hillside back in the Edo period. Not a place any human can walk right through."

Even if someone did, through excessive effort, go and commit suicide there, their body would have been devoured by a carnivore or returned to dirt. No chance of coming back as a ghost, then.

"Astounding. The whole story's a lie, from start to finish."

"Like most ghost stories are. They're not designed to make logical sense."

"Then, it is a lie that Gannes was destroyed, Sir Eiji?"

Ruey, who had been curiously listening in on our conversation, crooked his neck.

"I think it's true that it was destroyed."

I saw no reason to doubt that, when not a single survivor had been found for a hundred and fifty years. In a single night, though? I was skeptical about that. It felt purposefully terrifying.

"Maybe the rumor was intentionally spread by someone."

I glanced over at Miss Cielz.

2.

"Good read, Hermit." The dark elf grinned. "This city was destroyed by vampires."

"I see."

It is traditional for vampires to take the form of a bat or a rat. And, according to the popular consensus, vampirism is infectious. If a vampire bites you, you become a vampire. An epidemic that makes the common cold or flu look like child's play. The number of vampires would multiply like rats in a basement.

"I was told that it took ten days to seize control of the entire city."

"That's still a breakneck speed."

A whole city-state gone in ten days. Actually, if all them turned vampiric, that was more like a whole city-state had turned to the enemy. I didn't know the population numbers of Gannes at the time, but I could imagine that we weren't talking about a hundred or two from the well-built castle and walls. If there had been a population of ten thousand, for example, that would mean an army of ten thousand vampires joining the enemy. How could anyone defeat that?

"Apparently, the vampires were decimated in an instant," she cracked a self-deprecating grin.

“How did that happen?” I asked, with a surprisingly airheaded tone.

With one swing of Shizuru the Hero’s sword given to him by the god, a holy light enveloped the city of Gannes, turning every last vampire to dust. Ash to ash. Dust to dust.

I mean... That’s not really what a vampire hunter does, though, is it? It has to be, you know, more forbidden, and apocalyptic, and underworld. Like a certain Mister D. Isn’t that atmosphere what it’s all about?

What’s with the deus-ex-holy-light, dear brother?

He owed Hideyuki Kikuchi an apology.

“Well, no one goes into battle looking for atmosphere. It’s more efficient to take care of things as easily as possible.”

I did hear that both humans and monsters were nearing annihilation, back in those times. No time to find the romance in a war like that. I understood that, but imagining the residents of the city being robbed of their humanity without reason, then having even their vampiric lives evaporated in the blink of an eye... It seemed like they were just a number.

“That’s what war is, Eiji. How can anyone remain in their right mind without simplifying their enemy into mere numbers?”

The hero killed those monsters, one after another, as if he was performing a chore; I shuddered to imagine. Isn’t that a little much to bear for a boy, one who was high school-aged at the time? Of course, I had absolutely no idea who put that heavy weight on his shoulders.

“Maybe it was penance. For him bringing over rice.”

“Who knows? I can’t say what he was thinking. I never found out what was going through his mind or what he wanted.”

“...I’m sorry.”

Even after being transported to another world, she never saw her brother alive again. Nor found out what was on his mind. We could have tried to deduce it all we wanted, but we had no way to know if we were right or wrong.

“Nothing you should be sorry for or carry with you. He’s a stranger to you,” Tiamat said, somewhat keeping me at a distance.

It didn’t seem like she was upset but more... rigid, somehow. Like a wall that would never be weakened.

“You can’t carry it all. Let me take half. And I would love for you to carry half of my baggage too, Tia.”

“Mm. That doesn’t change the total weight at all.”

Two people collectively carrying the baggage of two people. Of course that won’t make it any lighter.

“Is that a no?”

“That was the plan when I took the ring. There’s no need to ask

that now.”

She twirled her silver locks. It appeared that she was embarrassed. I, too, could feel my cheeks redden.

“...How long is this going to last, love birds?” Miss Cielz asked in a very disgusted tone.

The humans did stand victorious at the end of the great war that brought the world to the brink of destruction. That being said, it wasn't like all of the monsters were massacred. There were a considerable number of them left after the Demon Lord's demise, and the world had a rather serious problem on its hands when those surviving monsters began attacking towns and farmlands in hordes.

With no structure to speak of, humans had to deal with these groups of monsters individually. That proved to be troublesome in a different way. In fact, the government began dealing with bandits and monsters in the same manner. They deployed their military at times, and left the town watches and adventurers to deal with them at other times. While the monsters were a nuisance, they were no longer a national threat. They were merely prey to be hunted down.

However, not all monsters succumbed to that fate. Some accepted their defeat and went into hiding to wait for a time to strike: the dark elves like Miss Cielz and those described as Hellions. The abandoned castle of Gannes became their lair, where no one lived and no one would visit. A location well-suited to playing a long con.

Of course, if humans discovered their secret lair, there was a decent chance that they would be attacked. There were some tear-jerking efforts to conceal their lair, like spreading ghost story rumors and disabling the travel road that used to lead to the city. These efforts lasted a century and a half. Finally, the moment they had been waiting for had arrived.

“The resurgence of the Demon Lord.”

“Yes,” Miss Cielz answered Tiamat, briskly.

A little more than a month ago, the figure had suddenly appeared in the abandoned castle. They had hair as black as darkness itself and eyes as dark as the dead of night, along with overwhelming magic and combat prowess. Of course, the surviving monsters from the time of the previous Demon Lord didn't immediately recognize them as a Demon Lord. They relied on power, not political stances nor ideals. A few of them challenged the Demon Lord, Miss Cielz being one among them.

“It wasn't even a fight,” she said, and chuckled. “I was just a toy on a fingertip.”

As would be expected. That's what a few cheat codes could do. No power or technique acquired after any amount of blood, sweat, tears,

and hard work stood a chance against cheat codes. If I was in their place, it would have all seemed ridiculous. Why bother with hard work at that point? “If you’re so powerful, you take care of it all yourself,” I’d say. Although that wouldn’t be very noble of me.

“Our Lord’s wisdom, as well as power, is truly awesome.”

Miss Cielz continued as if in a trance. Her expression told of her adoration for the Demon Lord. I imagined that the followers of Shizuru the Hero were of similar states of mind. He was from modern-day Japan, after all. Of course he would have more advanced knowledge than the people of this world.

“That alone won’t cover it. Just being from modern-day Japan doesn’t explain the strategies those monsters took, Eiji.”

Tiamat reined me back as I was chuckling. Right. Japanese civilians had no knowledge of military strategy. Other than in theory, perhaps. Our last war was over seventy years ago. There were barely any alive in Japan who had experienced war firsthand, and none of them had experienced combat with swords and magic. How could anyone in that situation conduct capable strategies?

We weren’t in a video game or a movie. Even in the sci-fi novel *G.I. Samurai*, where the Japanese self-defense force time-travels to feudal Japan, the self-defense force was annihilated despite their state-of-the-art technology. Wait. Did one survive?

Anyway, war is not as easy of a craft as us civilians think. You don’t have a convenient screen that shows you the enemies’ stats or anything. Just deciding how many fighters to send to which battlefield requires a lot of forethought.

“Maybe the Demon Lord got a cheat code for military knowledge, too.”

“We should assume so,” Tiamat said. “If the knowledge was brought in, we could have had an idea of the ceiling, making our lives a lot easier.”

As we continued our conversation quietly, we were nearing the city gates.

“No need to keep your human form here,” Miss Cielz remarked, as sarcastic as always.

3.

Two humans leading a dragon, Fenrir, and Cait Sith. Plus a donkey. Such a party would draw so much attention walking through a human city, but not in Gannes. There were dark elves, Hellions, Demons, and even human-animal hybrids. It was like a melting pot of humanoid species. In fact, Ruey and I were the odd ones out.

...We weren’t about to get snatched and eaten, were we?

“...I don’t sense any ill intentions, Sir Eiji,” Ruey said after carefully observing our surroundings inconspicuously while pulling the donkey’s reins.

“I sense curiosity. Perhaps that dark elf—Cielz, was she?—may have a considerable position in the army.”

“That makes sense.”

She did have complete authority over the life of one of their battalion leaders. That was a display of the Demon Lord’s trust in her, as well as in her powers to complete the mission without fail and to not make any incorrect decisions. Considering that she was working solo, I could imagine how deep the trust ran.

Us bureaucrats, for example, generally don’t work on our own. We are always in a pair or a larger group. Alone we wouldn’t be able to recover well from mistakes nor would we have anyone to hold us accountable. Especially when handling any money, even pocket change, we would always be in a group of two or more.

By the same token, the Demon Lord was confident that Miss Cielz would never compromise her work nor make any mistakes, even when acting on her own. It may seem trivial, but this was important.

“Mm. If I left you alone, I would be worried sick that you might drop dead from anything.”

Tiamat threw this jab in. Well, I’m sorry you can’t trust me to survive on my own for even a minute.

Great. The rest of our party was nodding along now. Even Mister Donkey. I was no fool, so I didn’t rush in where angels feared to tread. Know yourself and know your enemy to survive a thousand battles.

“We would be at ease if you just chickened out to somewhere safe, but you always have to stick your nose into the frontline, Eiji.”

“Our tribulations may never end.”

Tiamat and Hieronymus chuckled at each other.

Oh, laugh it up.

We walked down the streets, all buddy-buddy. We were never stopped for any questioning or anything. We weren’t welcomed nor turned away. What an awkward feeling.

Eventually we reached the castle gates, where there wasn’t a single guard. Wasn’t this a little too naive of them?

“Cielz sent a Thought Speech, so the monsters are standing back. For now.”

Tiamat explained the trick for me. While I was grateful, Ruey was made a fool for keeping his guard up.

“In any case, I would not have let my guard down anyway.” The Earl’s heir smiled.

What a nice guy.

“This way. Our lord will see you.”

Paying no mind to our comedy routine, Miss Cielz led us down the wide hallway. Since the castle was originally built for humans, it might have been a little cramped for the large magibeasts, but the architecture still provided ample space. I nearly couldn't believe that it was constructed over a hundred and fifty years ago. It seemed like it had always been properly maintained.

The giant doors opened without a sound, revealing a red carpet down the center of the space, leading to a set of steps that ascended to the throne. On said throne sat the current Demon Lord.

I spotted the black hair, as Miss Cielz had informed us. The silky straight hair, however, reached down to the middle of the Demon Lord's back. The Demon Lord's irises were black inside eyes that popped. All right. You know, I had expected the Demon Lord to be male. For some reason. I mean, it's not rare in light novels for the Demon Lord to be a young woman.

She was clearly Japanese and probably high school-aged. She stared at us, expressionless. I would have appreciated some sort of surprise, or smile, or scorn. Being unable to read anything from her expression was pretty stressful.

Miss Cielz left our side and stood beside the throne. Perhaps that was her usual position. And there she went, whispering something into the Demon Lord's ear. We, on the other hand, didn't kneel nor look down. We didn't serve her, and we never planned to.

"A pleasure to meet you. My name is Eiji."

Still, I spoke with a pleasant tone. Not one I would address royalty with, but one I would use to ask a visitor at my office if I could help them with anything.

The Demon Lord had been staring at me as she listened to Miss Cielz' report. Then, she suddenly spoke:

"Die."

In an instant, I felt a stabbing pain. I gripped my left chest with my hand.

"Wha...?"

My mouth gasped like a suffocating goldfish. My vision was fading.

Am I going to die again? Already? But this time, it's for real.

"A Kotodama. Elevated to a curse."

Tiamat patted my back. That's all she did. Then I could breathe easily and my chest pain vanished.

"Tia..."

"Don't sweat it. I won't let you die while I still stand."

"...Does that apply if you're on all four paws, Tia...?"

"You're well enough to jest. Good. Stand back a moment."

With that, she stepped forward, her tail slapping against the castle

floor. That's the way her tail moved when she was mad.

...How did I get to the point of reading her mood by how her tail moved? Isn't it scary how far we can adapt?

"What was the meaning of that, lass?"

Tiamat's tone was as cold as a gust of wind piercing through Sapporo in the dead of winter. Wind chills of negative 20 degrees Celsius. Uh oh.

Hurry up and apologize, Demon Lord!

"Shut up. You die, too."

Another Kotodama.

"Did you not realize from our conversation that your words won't affect me? Perhaps you're the type that has to try anyway."

Tiamat piled on, completely unbothered.

"Why...?!"

"It'd be a waste of time to keep doing the same thing, so I'll explain. Magic-Proof, I believe it's called. No magic, or curse, will affect me."

She continued to approach the Demon Lord without a care.

"Don't! Stop!"

"I won't."

I assumed that this command was also supposed to be magical. Despite Tiamat being completely unaffected by it.

"A little wild lass, are we? Trying to curse to death someone you've never met before."

Right. 'Wild lass' was a lot, coming from a woman who had turned into a dragon.

"Gr... You...!"

A sword materialized in the girl's hand. A pitch-black, really insidious-looking sword. With one move, she leaped from the throne and went to stab Tiamat. She was so fast that Ruey beside me let out a grunt in acknowledgment.

"Hmph."

The dragon spun around. With velocity, her tail ripped into the Demon Lord's side. The girl was blown away at a comedic speed, crashing into the wall of the throne room.

"You're fast, but wide open. Stand, lass. I'll make you pay for your attempted murder of my partner," Tiamat announced to the Demon Lord crawling on the ground, looking down on her. She was so scary that I wasn't sure which of them was the Demon Lord anymore.

The girl did not stand. She had let go of her sword, and had curled up with her head clasped in her hands. She seemed to be terrified by the overwhelming show of violence. I sympathized. There was something off about Tiamat as a creature.

"I said stand. Can't you hear?"

The dragon approached the girl, who let out a quiet cry. The dragon's enormous jaw gaped open, and moved closer to bite off the Demon Lord's head...

4.

"I'm kidding."

With that, Tiamat licked the Demon Lord's face. I thought that must have been scary in its own right. She took the Demon Lord by the hand, who couldn't move from her fetal position on the ground, and helped her up.

"Still, it's not very nice to tell someone to die out of the blue."

"..."

"There is some reason for it, I assume. Why don't you tell us?"

Tiamat guided her by her hand some more and approached us. Tiamat seemed like a kindergarten teacher at the moment.

"Which do you prefer, cats or dogs?"

"...Dogs."

"Mm. Baze. Won't you come over here and help her stay up, please?"

"Sis, I... Okay, all right..."

The Fenrir, with an expression that said he had completely given up, laid down next to the Demon Lord. Wow. She just used a Fenrir like a stuffed animal.

The Demon Lord slowly leaned into him. I mean, his silver fur was really soft, so I was sure that it provided some sense of safety.

Please, Lord Baze. Don't look at me like that. I can't do anything to help you. I'm sorry.

"Now, why don't you tell us your name? I don't want to keep calling you 'lass.'"

Then Tiamat introduced herself, much more genuinely than I did. Her skills as a school counselor were coming through.

"Rio Kodama. I call myself Leon here."

"Understood. Now, Leon, we are not here to fight."

Her tone was kind, as if to ease the tension between them. The Demon Lord nodded ever so slightly.

Ruey and Miss Cielz didn't seem to be following the rapid turn of events. Obviously. The Demon Lord went berserk, then a dragon tore up the throne room. I would have given them the toughest constitution award if they had maintained their composure through all of this.

"We would like to discuss the future with you. But first, tell me about you, Leon. If you don't want to talk in front of them, we'll get them out of here."

Tiamat winked. At me. *Leave it to me*, she was saying. I had no doubts about Tiamat's handle on the situation. Acknowledging her wink, I urged our friends and the dark elf to exit the throne room with me, leaving Baze to be used like a couch.

Hang in there, Lord Baze.

Led by Miss Cielz once more, we moved to a guest room.

"...I never thought our lord could be so fragile," she muttered, exhausted.

I thought it might be best for me to console her.

"It can't be helped, given how young she is. Fifteen or sixteen, I presume. It would have been much stranger for anyone that age to act like a well-rounded adult."

"Is she really?"

The dark elf looked astonished. From my knowledge pool of fantasy worlds, dark elves were a very longevous species. To her, a girl of sixteen must seem like a toddler.

"Most likely, Miss Leon is from the realm of dragons, like us. She's a Hermit."

"No, Sir Eiji. Our lord may appear to be human, but she has Hellion wings on her back and a rune on her abdomen. She can't be a Hermit."

That would make her a Hellion, apparently. ...How did she know about the rune? Did they take baths together, or something?

"Sometimes Hermits change forms when traveling to this world. Tia took the form of a dragon, for example."

I explained the situation, more or less. Tiamat had requested her form, but I wasn't sure how Leon the Demon Lord had acquired hers. Was it a form of her choosing or of the on-site god's? I assumed that it was the latter. It wouldn't have worked out for someone to remain human while being tasked to torment humans. Still, I was willing to bet that she wasn't as out there as Tiamat, so she chose the most humanoid form.

"Now, I have a question for you, Miss Cielz."

Why did the Demon Lord try to kill me out of the blue? It was so sudden. We hadn't had enough interaction with each other for her to hate me. We hadn't even held a conversation before. I didn't think my life was so sinful that I deserved to be killed at first sight... I hoped.

"I don't know," Miss Cielz said, painfully.

She had whispered to Leon that we had come with no intention to fight, but to talk. Of course, she didn't ask Leon to kill us or anything.

"Are you sure about that, you dark elf?"

Ruey glared at her. His complete distrust was written all over his face.

"Unlike humans, I don't break a promise once I make it."

Her glare met his, sparks flying. These two really didn't get along. I suppose no one could have gotten along in their shoes.

"Now, now. If we can't believe what Miss Cielz says, we can't even begin to negotiate. That's our starting point, Ruey."

I calmed him down, holding up my palms. That being said, now Leon's actions made even less sense. Trying to kill someone who came to talk without even hearing them out. She didn't seem that aggressive of a person. In fact, she seemed like a quiet type of girl.

"She doesn't act like she looks. I wonder what's going on?"

Not that there aren't people like that out there. There are loads of people that commit crimes while looking like they wouldn't hurt a fly, and many people have an intimidating face but a heart of gold. While I kept thinking that the concept wasn't a difficult one, I just couldn't convince myself.

"She tried to kill me without batting an eye." I shook my head a little.

We weren't in Japan. Life was worth a lot less. While I knew that, it wasn't something I could get over all too easily. In fact, I hadn't killed anyone before, although I was bracing myself that such a thing could happen.

"I don't get it..."

"Only natural. It's a world you never would have come across." Tiamat jumped in.

I looked around to find the beautiful dragon princess standing at the doorway to the guest room. She seemed to have walked right through the castle without so much as a guide. What a free-spirited woman she was.

"Tia. You're done already?"

"She cried herself to sleep. I left her with Baze," she said as she plopped down on the couch.

First thing's first: I threw up a prayer for Lord Baze. He committed the ultimate sacrifice. Amen.

"A world I never would have come across?"

"Hm. Have you heard of the phrase 'frozen eyes' before?"

"No, I'm uneducated in that world, it seems."

"It's not a phrase anyone would hear or read if they are living an ordinary life. In short, it indicates abused children."

"What?!"

"Habitually abused children gradually lose the ability to express emotions. Eventually, their eyes appear frozen, devoid of any light."

Tiamat explained this, matter-of-factly. Eyes are the window to the soul, as they say, and when children are abused, they lose all emotions from their eyes.

"That's why Leon...?"

“Mm. She was a victim of domestic violence in Japan. And so, frozen eyes. To confirm that, I had to play a mean trick.”

“Oh...”

She had defeated the Demon Lord with direct violence. Well, not even that. She just hit her with her tail. That’s all she had to do to make Leon the Demon Lord overcome with fear.

“What the hell...” I couldn’t help but groan.

I knew that children are abused. As a statistic. But had I really accepted that as a fact of the world I lived in? Had I not convinced myself that it was only happening on some distant planet?

“Does Leon want to annihilate the human race for revenge...?”

“Not sure. I doubt that she even has that much emotion left in her.”

“What...?”

“Their eyes don’t freeze while they still have a drive for revenge.”

They lose emotions because they have forsaken everything. Even the will to live. But humans are creatures of emotion.

“Then... Why...?”

“I can’t be certain before I have more sessions with her. But I suspect she did it because the god on-site asked. Nothing more.” Tiamat sighed.

Again? It was orchestrated by the god on-site, again?

“...That does it...”

I could feel my teeth grind into each other.

5.

Rio Kodama, the girl summoned by the god on-site, had been given the powers to rule over the monsters. Overwhelming magic, demonic charisma, the knowledge of military strategies, incredible physicality, etc., etc.

“It seems that even a god can’t change the deepest part of one’s heart.”

Tiamat sighed. The Demon Lord Leon was weak against direct violence. Even if being blown away by a dragon’s tail might have been fatal for a human, it apparently wouldn’t have done enough damage to the Demon Lord. I mean, I didn’t think too many Demon Lords out there would perish at the whack of a tail. Still, while said attack barely dealt any physical damage, Leon was left cowering.

“The actual damage output doesn’t matter,” Tiamat added.

What mattered was the flashback she endured. One of the typical symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The tail attack must have revived her memories of being beaten. An attack with a sword or spell might have been different enough from her memories for her not to

have a flashback.

“You knew that much before you attacked?”

“Just a deduction with no other way to prove it. When you’re in my business...” the dragon princess trailed off.

She’d seen it many times before, I’m sure. I gave a little nod. There wasn’t much I could do to mend the heart of Leon the Demon Lord. I wasn’t an expert.

“The problem is the god on-site.”

I changed the subject. What was the purpose of this sinister casting? Tiamat had said that Leon’s motivation wasn’t as simple as taking revenge upon humanity. That’s why things were complicated. A girl enacting a plan to end humanity without a shred of emotion. I felt something cold on my spine, and shook my head.

“With time, I don’t think it’s impossible to make peace with Leon. The real problem comes after that,” Tiamat said.

“Right...”

The god on-site had already tried to reignite the war between humans and monsters. I doubted that the god would give up so easily even if this particular attempt were to fail. Besides, this world was still plagued by our original problem: beriberi.

We weren’t even close to figuring out how to save this world. Burdening the food supply through war was actually a rather realistic approach. Beriberi drastically decreased in Japan during WWII as well. But that was the one option I could not accept. There is no way that a world can be saved by war.

“Mm. Then we only have one option.” Tiamat nodded, without mocking my personal dogma.

“We have to convince the Demon Lord to stop the war and explore how to save the world together.”

“If coexisting is impossible, what will we do?” Tiamat asked.

“Segregation, of course.”

My answer wasn’t creative or unique, but humans are only meant to coexist with other humans, at least if we’re talking about equal standpoints. Could any of us coexist with an uncaged lion or tiger? The lion can claim all it wants that it won’t eat the human, but the human won’t believe it. That’s why we cage our predators. We don’t coexist with them. They are our pets.

The same logic applied for monsters and humans in this world. Our values were too different not to start a war. Because of that, our most efficient solution at this point was to keep our territories separate from one another. The monsters would build their kingdom somewhere far away from where the humans lived.

While it was very possible that both sides would clash again once transportation methods evolved, that would have to be dealt with

down the road. I didn't have the skills to construct a plan that will last a hundred or a thousand years.

"And what specific plan are we enacting, Lord Eiji?" Hieronymus asked, waving his tail to and fro.

What I had just declared was a slogan and not a solution. If there wasn't enough land, an attempt at segregation would turn into fighting over that land. It was out of the question for the monsters to take any land occupied by humans. Starting off with a grudge was not going to be good, anyway.

"Tia. Are there any bountiful lands around that aren't inhabited by humans?" I asked Lady Tiamat, the omniscient tour guide.

"There is a plot of land that no man has touched that's about the size of Ishikari plains."

"That's a huge plot of land, isn't it?!"

About 3,800 square kilometers. It might be difficult to picture its size with just that number, but that was large enough to cover ten cities, including Sapporo, Ebetsu, and Iwamizawa. All of that land left untouched? It seemed like there was plenty of land to go around.

"Earth is vast, but not to humans. Neither is the expansive universe, in fact."

Tiamat chuckled. While her explanation might be a little ambiguous, she meant that it didn't matter to humans how vast a space was if they weren't using it. Outer space was a realm reserved for highly trained professionals. For most, outer space might as well not exist. The most us commoners could hope for is imagining what could be up there among the stars.

"Then, all the monsters will immigrate there?"

"All monsters who wish to do so, Lord Hieronymus."

It didn't seem quite possible to move the entire monster population in a caravan. I expected a good number of them to refuse to leave their homeland, too.

"We might grow our strength in our newfound home in preparation to destroy humanity, Lord Eiji."

Of course, it was Miss Cielz that interjected, teasingly. Ruey flashed a frown.

"That may become a reality. But not in the next fifty or a hundred years, I'm willing to bet."

The challenge of humans and monsters coexisting was not a dire issue that required immediate resolution. That required a long process of trial and error, I figured, until they could see each other as anything other than beasts to be hunted down and mere prey.

"I only need to buy enough time for that to happen."

"...You're an idealist."

"I can't argue with that. Still, I believe that war is never the better

option over peace. That is definitely one of the few truths in this world that the Dragon Realm has learned over the past seventy years.”

I am part of a generation that knows nothing but the peaceful and prosperous Japan. Of course, I know very well that my beloved homeland is far from a utopia. There’s a large class divide, and no one sees a difference in the supposedly improving economy. Crime is ever rampant, and the number of suicides grows every year. Political corruption is reported almost every day... Every news story only adds stress to our days. But still.

“I think it’s a million times better than being at war.”

I knew I sounded naïve, and that war did most likely drive the progression of our society throughout history.

“You solved the monster problem. Now you’ll ignore the danger this world is facing?”

Suddenly, a girl’s voice interrupted us. I turned to the entrance, a little surprised, to find Leon astride Baze. She was up... and apparently really liked the Fenrir. This Demon Lord couldn’t have used her own feet, at least within her castle?! Poor Baze was sulking, his snout down into the ground.

“I can’t ignore that. We plan to find effective foods in Noura, too.”

I shrugged, trying to avoid looking at Baze. In our journey so far, we had discovered that wild rice was effective at keeping beriberi at bay, and we had met people whose diets didn’t revolve around white rice. These were insights I hadn’t expected to gain. Now we were going to research seafood and bran, as planned.

“It’s always about food with you, isn’t it?”

“Well, our lives revolve around eating and sleeping. We can’t do anything if we don’t have a good foundation for those things,” I answered seriously.

These were serious matters. A brain surgeon acquaintance of mine had said that no illness can be cured without food and sleep.

“...Weirdo.”

Who’s weird, again?

“He is my betrothed, after all.”

Alas, I couldn’t even get a word of defense from Tiamat. Now the Demon Lord was nodding in agreement. There would be tears for this! ...My tears.

6.

We had managed to start our discussion with the Demon Lord, somehow. ...How did we get here, again? Leon was only tasked by the god on-site to bring about order to the world. That’s kind of vague. She wasn’t asked to destroy humanity nor to save the monsters. She

just naturally took the side of the monsters since she had taken the form of a Hellion. This seemed inevitable; a Hellion couldn't very well waltz around a human city without expecting any trouble.

"So, you started by waging war against our nation."

Ruey grunted and crossed his arms. While he might not have liked it, this seemed only natural too. The ruin of Gannes was already inside Noura territory. However you slice or dice it, the first obstacle the monsters had to tackle would have been the kingdom of Noura.

"But you had no intentions of destroying Noura. You wanted to go north."

Leon nodded at Tiamat's confirmation. She went after that important port to access the travel roads.

"So you were already looking for a new land to settle in, Miss Leon?"

"Mm. That's correct, Eiji."

The plains to the far north, where no human had touched before. She had her eyes set on it from the very beginning.

"There would be no progress while we stayed in Gannes. Would have been too late if we waited," the Demon Lord added matter-of-factly.

She meant that, if they had to fight eventually, she had to make a move while they still had the strength to win. Incredibly strategic for a highschooler. She had a good read on the future, and was decisive and even charismatic. I wished that she could be my boss.

"Was that the right strategy for them, Ruey?" I asked our only trained military personnel.

"I can't really justify anyone forsaking their headquarters, Sir Eiji. However, the most terrifying thing about monsters is their ability to appear anywhere. It's scary to know that they aren't attached to Gannes."

"Hm. I see."

I crossed my arms.

"Why don't you be honest, Eiji?" Tiamat asked.

"...I don't see. At all."

Well, could you blame me?! I was no expert!

"Well, no matter how well they try to hide it, Noura would have eventually found Gannes, like we did today. While we wouldn't reach this conclusion this early into war, if we were to fight many more battles anyone would see that we'd have to strike their headquarters. There'd be no use trying to hide it then. As long as it was serving its function as a base, there'd have to be some manpower and resources going in and out of it." Ruey broke it down for me.

All right. The city of Ebetsu, next to my hometown of Sapporo, tries to remain self-sufficient as much as possible, which means that

they try to live off of things they make in the city. While that is a noble pursuit, it is difficult for that alone to cover all of the city's needs. Many things have to be acquired from outside of the city. That's economics.

"Once this location is discovered, a full-blown attack would follow. Then, Gannes would fall."

"Wait, why? With all of the powerful monsters here?"

"There would be no need for combat. Once we trap them in and stop resources from going in, I believe the monster army would crumble on its own."

"You'd starve them out!"

"I can't say ditching your only headquarters is a good idea, but sometimes it's required to stay hidden. If they already had a plan to find a new home, I could see merit in ditching the city and starting the move early. Like I said, monsters are truly formidable out in the field."

Wow. It finally clicked. What a good teacher he'd make.

"...Weirdo," the little Demon Lord mumbled.

You already said that. You know I can hear you, right?

"In any case, the quicker they get on the move the better, right?" I asked.

I got it. No more monsters around, no more battles. Perfect.

"We can't."

"Right, you can't... Wait, why not?"

Leon chimed in so naturally that I couldn't help but join in. How embarrassing.

"Since we couldn't take Mostail, we'll just be attacked if we go on the move."

"Oof..."

I clasped my head. We did contribute in defending Mostail, after all. Now that war had begun, a band of monsters walking down a travel road like refugees would, of course, be attacked. What to do...?

"Help me, Tia-emon."

"Stop being so pathetic in front of a teenager."

Tiamat sighed as I easily resorted to begging for help. What was I supposed to do? I was not a strategist, nor did I have any knowledge of military action.

"No one is expecting you to have any. You have to use your talents to your advantage."

"Oh!"

"Mm. We can negotiate with Noura with the recent turn of events in mind."

The dragon princess laughed. The monster army attacked Mostail, only to be driven away by Eiji the Hermit and his companions. The Hermit's party followed the monsters to their headquarters; there they

negotiated with the Demon Lord and secured a promise to leave the kingdom of Noura. That's our story.

If we could get the kingdom of Noura to swallow this, there would be no more bloodshed. There was the issue of reparations for the war, but maybe giving the castle of Gannes to Noura would take care of that. I wasn't sure.

Of course, there is always an element of give and take in negotiations. Logic alone won't cut it. Pinning the opponent down to the ground doesn't count as negotiating. In fact it would be a miracle if such a thing could change one's mind.

"I think we can do it...?"

I nodded, calculating our next moves in my mind. First we would save Noura from warfare, then from beriberi.

"Then it's settled. Our next destination is the capital of Noura," Hieronymus concluded.

Still, we couldn't very well leave the same day we had arrived. For the night, we had decided to find lodging in Gannes.

"Domestic violence is actually a rather serious issue," Tiamat said, as she sprawled out onto the bed.

It was well into the night, and she and I were once again sharing a room.

"Even I know that is a serious issue."

"Mm. That's why you're not sure how close you can get."

"Yeah."

Generally, I try to speak to others in a polite manner, almost out of habit. At my job, a little informality could swiftly get me in trouble. That being said, I speak frankly to my coworkers, and, of course, to my friends and girlfriend.

As for Leon, I was having a tough time deciding how to speak to her. She was the same age as Syfer and Ruey, but I couldn't exactly speak to her the same way I did to them. I hadn't interacted informally with Miss Cielz, who serves Leon. Ordinarily I should keep things businesslike, regardless of age, since we were on opposite sides.

Now, it was a problem that Leon had been abused. It was a sensitive issue, and I had no firsthand experience. I was never struck by my parents nor was I ever bullied in school. I just knew about these things like something I read in a book. Even when I tried to get close, I felt myself being fake, somehow. I couldn't tell how best to speak to her.

"That's all right. You can't be in her shoes. Neither can I, of course."

Tiamat was being vague, but I understood the gist.

"I don't really know how to act around a teenage girl, either. I

don't think it's right to treat her like I do Syfer or Ruey."

Those were boys. They could take a little less delicate treatment.

"That's what we call sexism in our field of work. Just treat them the same." Tiamat chuckled.

"Really?"

I was asking about the second half of her statement, by the way. It didn't really matter how I spoke to Syfer or Ruey.

"Walk on eggshells around her and you'll only hurt her worse. It's imperative that you don't treat her like an outlier."

"Okay. I'll keep that in mind."

"Now, it's a crime if you flirt with her."

"I won't! She's a highschooler!"

"And with Cielz?"

"...I won't."

"I won't ask why it took you longer to answer."

The dragon princess teased me and stretched her jaws open in a yawn.

7.

It was early in the morning. As we were packing up to leave, we had visitors to our room: Leon and Baze. Did they sleep together the night before?! What a lucky guy you were, Lord Baze! So jealous! I wished them a lifetime of happiness!

"Boss Man... Sis..."

A voice boomed like it was coming from the bowels of the earth. Apparently he wasn't in the mood to accept my congratulations. Yep. I already knew that.

Lord Baze didn't know how to treat Leon either. This Fenrir had become very close to humans, but he preferred more feral or roughhousing friendships between men. Even in Mostail, he had sung with Earl Agamemnon, arms around each other's shoulders. Being touchy-feely with girls was solely handled by Hieronymus around here.

"I hear a little thorn in your voice, Lord Eiji."

The Cait Sith popped out from behind Baze. In human form, for some reason. His arm intertwined with Miss Cielz's, for some reason. Okay. I silently begged him to not explain. Don't tell me what happened the night before. I wanted to remain good friends with him. Damn it.

"Please... Tell her... Leon's insisting on coming with us..." Baze muttered.

"Oof..."

That was a twist. Tiamat and I faced each other.

"Leon. We're headed to Nourn. The capital. Don't you have things

you need to take care of?"

I took a stab at convincing her, after clearing my throat. I tried being informal without sounding uncaring.

"Cielz can prep for the migration. The skeleton is done. I don't need to give orders about everything. Besides, I don't entirely trust you, either. I can't disregard the possibility that you will notify them of our location once you're in the capital."

She responded with an answer perfectly laid out with logic. It made sense. We weren't on the side of the monsters; if anything, we were on the other side.

"So you're coming along to keep an eye on us, Leon."

"Yes."

"But isn't that the sort of thing you can delegate? What about Miss Cielz?"

"She can't handle a situation if it goes south."

Hold on a minute. She was plenty strong. She easily lost to Tiamat, but she's like an outlier of the natural order.

"Mm. I am the strongest there is."

"That wasn't really a compliment, Miss Tia."

"I'm about as strong as Tia," Leon chimed in. "I can get away if something happens or destroy the capital if I need to."

That wasn't exactly a peaceful sight to imagine, but those were reasonable conditions. There was no reason for the monster army to trust us wholeheartedly. Even if we wouldn't go as far as tell their secret location, we very well would have the chance to make a run for it. Someone had to keep an eye on us, and not anyone could do the job.

"Of course, we'll take a hostage from you, too."

"...Right."

"I shall accept that role," Hieronymus volunteered.

That would hurt. He was the brains of our party and my guard during combat. Going without him would be tough. But who else was there...? Not Tiamat. She's the core of our team; that was out of the question. Baze was out, too. He's our expert hunter and our best fighter when Tiamat isn't involved. The job would be difficult for Ruey, too, as our navigator. The only one we could afford to lose...

"...is me."

What a tragic realization. I wanted to cry.

"What's wrong with you, you idiot."

"Sorry."

I was tasked with negotiating with the king, so I couldn't stay here.

"From the process of elimination, the task befalls me."

Hieronymus smiled, stroking his well-kept beard. Theatrical

gestures suited him well. It couldn't be helped, though.

"Give it up, Lord Baze. I don't think there's room for debate."

"Boss Man..."

Hang in there.

I could only pray for him. Then I wondered why Leon and Miss Cielz gave each other a look, followed by a laughter. Perhaps there was some dark bargaining going on... pertaining to the allocation of Baze and Hieronymus, maybe? I was too scared to confirm anything though.

Tiamat and I walked side-by-side, led by Ruey holding the donkey's reins. Baze followed us in the rear of the party, carrying Leon, sitting with her legs out to one side. It was picturesque... but couldn't she have walked on her own? The rest of us were walking, after all.

A day and a half had passed since we left the castle of Gannes when we arrived at the main travel road. I expected that we would be able to spend nights at inns again. I was sure that a girl riding a Fenrir wasn't something they saw every day, but they'll just have to accept her as an adventurer. I think Tiamat had them beat in rarity, anyway.

"If we keep going down south we should reach Nourn in five days or so," Ruey informed us as he checked his maps.

Still a little ways to go.

"I can finally sleep in a bed again."

"We slept in beds just two nights ago," Ruey pointed out.

"I'm getting used to it, but sleeping out here is still rough."

"I won't argue with that."

We laughed. No adventurer or soldier slept under the stars by choice.

"Will you turn into a human at the inn, Baze?"

"Yeah. I can't really go into a human town looking like this."

"But you're so cool."

"If I don't, I'll have to go through the whole shebang that we're Hermits and friends."

A delightful conversation could be heard from behind me (by Leon and Baze, of course). They seemed to have grown quite fond of each other. I was glad they seemed to have formed a good friendship.

"It could be a turning point when he takes his human form,"

Tiamat mumbled as she glanced behind us.

She had continued Leon's counseling so far. Of course, an abused girl's heart couldn't be expected to heal right up after a few conversations. That would take a much, much longer time.

"Is it bad that he'll be a grown man, Tia?"

I had to ask. I fit that category too.

“Not sure. Flashbacks aren’t something that anyone can predict. Still...” the dragon princess continued.

In most cases, a child’s abuser is one or both of their parents or step-parents. Apparently, other cases include the employees of the child’s care facility abusing them. Most of the time, the adults tasked with protecting the children are the abusers.

I wasn’t sure what to do with my indignation when Tiamat informed me that it wasn’t a newfound social issue. This formula is as old as time. The strong bully the weak, who bully someone weaker than them, and so on. Perhaps that’s a sort of incurable disease humanity hosts.

“Of course, ‘incurable’ isn’t going to cut it for those actually being abused.”

“Right. We can’t stop looking for solutions just because it’s a long-lasting problem.”

“The answer is never simple, but there could be various reasons why she isn’t triggered by you. Your image may be completely different from her father, or your age, or your smell...”

“Ah. Lord Baze and I do look very different.”

“That’s why I can’t predict what’s going to happen. If her mother figure was her abuser, she may be triggered by my human form.”

“Anything we could do?”

Tiamat slowly shook her head to answer my question. Apparently, we couldn’t prepare any of the tools in her arsenal in our situation, and we’re not even supposed to try and help when we weren’t asked to do so. Only detectives in mystery novels (and those online horoscopes) try to deduce someone’s mind. Counselors, on the other hand, wait as long as it takes for the patient to open up to them.

“All we can do is sit back and watch, then?”

“You may feel like it’s not enough, but the human heart usually doesn’t take a straight course.”

At that, I turned around to find Leon petting Baze’s fur. It seemed more like compensation than a part of pet therapy. I couldn’t help but avert my eyes.

8.

Leon the Demon Lord did not have a panic attack upon seeing Baze’s human form and only did one long exhale. Perhaps Tiamat understood the meaning of that action, but I was far from doing so. I couldn’t dig in with a bunch of questions either.

“When she’s ready, she’ll tell us on her own.”

I could only decide to trust my fiancée’s words.

There were no incidents at the town we stayed the night in,

either, other than rumors going around about us. Rumors about the Hermit that defeated the monster army out of Mostail with the hero of the city, Earl Agamemnon; about the wise holy man, with the Dragon Princess and Star Breaker in tow, traveling the world to bring it peace and prosperity; about the saint who never accepts any reward other than the smiles of the people he saves.

So... who was this sketchy guy that sounded like some cult leader? Even in bars, the bards were singing about us to showcase their talent. If there was a hole, I would have buried myself in it.

“That expression originated in the ancient text of Jia Yi, by the way, meant to be used when you are ashamed of your own lack of knowledge. Not when you are embarrassed.”

“Damn it. If there was a hole I would bury myself in it!”

“During the bubble economy in Japan, it was used for a much different meaning, since it was trendy to have as many sexual partners as possible.”

“That usage is so derailed.”

Trivia DLC in full force. That knowledge was seriously useless.

“What hole?” Leon crooked her neck.

See! Look who responded! A highschooler!

“I-I-I-I think you’ll understand when you’re older. I think. Probably.”

I tried to mend the situation, albeit a little rattled, while Tiamat was over there enjoying her ale like she did nothing wrong. Damn it.

“Weirdo.”

The girl laughed, ever so slightly I thought. Was that a good sign? More importantly, I was being called a weirdo way too often. I wasn’t weird. I was the straight man of the group, if anything. I looked at Tiamat for some assistance.

“Another one.”

“Oh, another ale for me too, please.”

Since I was met with a spectacular brush-off, I ordered a drink too. We were munching on soybeans and some stewed meat. They were only seasoned with salt, but the flavor of the meat pulled through. They went pretty great with ale. We were no longer in season for edamame, but they seemed to be cooking the soybeans themselves.

“It’s good, right? These were taught to us by the Hermit, too.”

The woman who appeared to be the manager of the joint informed us of this blatant lie as she brought us ale. I never came with dishes like these, so it must have been Mister Murdock’s doing. His troupe was way ahead of us, and it seemed that they advertised soybean dishes everywhere they went.

It was great PR to claim that the dishes originated from Hermits, and they had actually traveled with those Hermits themselves. What’s

more, the ingredients were practically free. Given the prowess of that old storyteller, I expected them to make bank if they sold the dishes for dirt cheap. They were business-savvy, alright. I let out a chuckle as I imagined the scene unfolding.

The capital of Noura, Nourn, was about the same size as Lishua of Azul with a population of around thirty to forty thousand. Once we arrived at the city without a hitch, we first decided on the inn to become our base of operation. I mean, there was no way we would have an audience with the king just by walking up to the castle. We'd be right back on the streets in a minute. We couldn't even reach the conversation stage without a plan to have an audience with him.

We did have a good connection though, by the name of Earl Agamemnon. While earldom was not one of the highest ranks in this country, he was trusted with a major port. I imagined he had considerable influence in court, and we had his heir with us: Ruey. We would get an appointment through him.

That was our first step, but this wasn't something we could immediately expect the results of. A letter, accompanied by a bribe, would change hands a few times before reaching the king. This process alone would take days. Then the king would arrange his schedule and send us a messenger with the date of our meeting. By a rough estimate, I expected this process to take ten to twelve days.

"Mm. It would still be a major event just to have an audience with him," Tiamat said.

"Yeah. It's the same thing as requesting to see our emperor."

By handing a solitary letter to one of the imperial palace guards. In Japan, there's no way that could fly.

One reason that we could pull it off in this world was our title as Hermits. Just as it did in the kingdom of Azur, it carried a special weight such that even a king could not ignore a request from us. Another reason was, as I've mentioned, our connection. The recommendation of Ruey Agamemnon, a member of noble society, would become a competent weapon for us. And finally, a handsome reward. A trifold strategy that would make Oda Nobunaga blush!

"What does this have to do with the battle of Nagashino?"

Leon gave me an icy stare.

Stop it, little girl. If you look at me like... I'll fall for you.

"Mm. I can't give you an icy look, so I'll give you a hot breath."

"Don't! You'll kill me!"

Tiamat and I were goofing around.

"Weirdo."

Leon seemed exasperated. This was going to be my playstyle for a while. Adults were nothing she had to fear. She was at a good place

when she found us a little annoying, even. I had suggested to Tiamat that we up our lovey-dovey-ness until Leon grew exasperated, after noticing a very slight sense of relief in Leon every time she called me a weirdo. My guess was that she feared any non-weirdo adult. Tiamat didn't oppose.

"It can't hurt her," she'd said, and agreed to play along.

Tiamat and I had been putting our love on display ever since, no matter who was watching.

"So that's what you call a comedy routine in Hokkaido? I didn't know," said Leon.

"Apologize to all 5.3 million of its residents!"

"You will?"

"Sorry."

Perhaps aided by my plan, it felt like Leon was slowly opening up to us. However, Tiamat had said that this was the most perilous stage, too. Leon had been abused for several years, at least. It would have been a little overconfident of us to imagine that we could thaw her frozen heart after a few days of knowing her.

"But it is really boring just waiting for a royal messenger." Tiamat, in human form, stretched her arms.

Boring? We had just arrived at Nourn the same day. Did she think life was a sprint? Let's take it slow. I, for one, wanted to laze around for a few days in the inn!

"While we're here, do you want to do a gig?"

"I don't see the connection."

All work and no play makes Eiji a dull boy.

"We're adventurers, but haven't done any adventure-y things. We are in a fantasy world after all. This isn't right."

Um... We did go hunt gags, dug up beets, traveled with a band of performers, got caught up in a battle against the monster army, walked right into the Demon Lord's lair, and now we were about to negotiate with the Demon Lord and the king to find a peaceful resolution.

"No, no. Don't you think our journey has been rather eventful so far?"

"I want to dungeon-crawl."

Now, we hadn't done anything like that. No underground dungeons or treasure hunting adventurers. Everything we'd done so far had been all about day-to-day life.

"Don't you want to catch a monster and cook it?"

"That's definitely from a particular manga."

"I want to eat a Red Dragon."

"Isn't that cannibalism?"

Tiamat was a dragon. Why did she want to eat a dragon?

"I hate to break it to you, Sir Eiji, Lady Tiamat. There are no dungeons around Nourn," Ruey informed us with a half-chuckle.

"How lame."

"If there was a dungeon, you really wanted to go, Tia?"

My fiancée was always a wild one. We were about to see the king, and she wanted to dungeon-crawl.

"Weirdo."

Wait, Leon. I'm not the weirdo here. Tiamat is.

9.

Our meeting with Lyser, the king of Noura, happened a lot faster than expected. To our surprise, a royal messenger came to our inn a mere two days after we gave the guard our letter. That was a little more than expedited.

"Murdock had already gained an audience with him. The king was so very happy to hear of my father's and your bravery, Sir Eiji, that he had been wanting to see us," Ruey informed us, after speaking with the messenger.

Way to go, Mister Murdock! He had managed to perform in the palace when his troupe arrived. I bet they made a fortune in tips. I planned to have him buy me a meal when I saw him. If they were still in Nourn, that is.

"I told the messenger that we will come to the palace tomorrow."

"Hm? Why not today, Ruey?"

The sun was still high. While I couldn't tell accurate time without my Chronograph, it was definitely before noon. I didn't understand why we would wait until the next day.

"I thought it might be necessary for us to clean ourselves up a bit."

"Oof..."

Right. I was dressed like any poor adventurer just starting out on his career. Definitely not the kind of look you want when going to see the king.

"Why don't we take the opportunity to go to a barber, Sir Eiji?"

"Ooh, good idea," I agreed as I played with the ends of my hair, which had grown a decent amount. Nearly three months had passed since I arrived in this world; three months without a single haircut. I had only been shaving by grazing my cheeks with a knife too. I was not well-kept by any means.

We had soap with us, but it didn't lather like a bar of soap in modern Japan. It was just congealed charcoal and animal fat anyway. It didn't even smell good. Apparently, a rudimentary form of soap was first used in 3000 B.C.E., coincidentally invented both in ancient

Rome and Mesopotamia around the same time. And, by the eighth century, 'soap maker' had become a profession. According to Tiamat, of course!

In any case, I couldn't deny that I hadn't paid much mind to my appearance since arriving in this world. I couldn't lick myself clean like Baze or Hieronymus.

"Mm. You do need to at least keep yourself presentable. Not only when meeting royalty, but anyone."

With that Tiamat sent us off, after making plans to meet up later and get decent clothes. Of course, we weren't talking luxuries like made-to-order stuff from tailors. We weren't nobles or tycoons. Just like many commoners, all we needed were touched-up second-hand wear. Not that those were very cheap either.

It may be well-known that haircuts used to be performed by surgeons. Barber surgeons, they were called. Their red, white, and blue pole used to represent blood, bandages, and the veins, respectively.

Feeling refreshed after a haircut and a shave, Ruey and I met up with the rest of the party and took a walk around the streets of Nourn.

"You look more manly now," Tiamat said.

"Are you falling for me all over again?"

"Not that I ever fell for your looks to begin with. There's no newfound love just because you became 1.12 times manlier."

"How precise of you! What's with the decimal point?!"

"It's an approximation."

"What's that in math, again?"

Sorry, I was the opposite of a math major.

"Not the perfectly accurate number, but an approximate number that is close enough to be used in its place," Leon answered.

Yeah? Well, I still didn't get it.

"...Like pi."

"Oh."

The example helped a lot. I learned to represent pi as 3.14, but pi is indivisible. Since it wouldn't have been efficient to calculate hundreds and thousands of digits, we settled on 3.14 for convenience. Which means that my manliness was boosted about 1.12 times through the haircut, ignoring all the digits after the hundredth that make the rate indivisible.

Wait. That was really a strange amount. Was the base product so bad that it improved a little over 10% from just a haircut? Or was 12% the best I could improve my looks, despite my efforts? As I sank into despair...

"Weido," Leon said, with a little laugh.

In any case, we bought our clothes.

“What is with that lackluster description?”

“I mean, nothing noteworthy happened.”

We just bought clothes that looked decent enough and changed into them. If I was some beautiful young lady, a scene in the dressing room might have had an audience. But who wanted an inside look of a man in his thirties picking out clothes?

“There’s no fun in that.”

“Utility over looks when it comes to adventuring.”

Like a military uniform. It wasn’t something fashionable, but only needed to be functional and useful.

“On the other hand, your outfit is on point, Sir Eiji. No one would guess that you’re an F... Oh, excuse me.”

Ruey caught himself, much, much too late.

“Mm. Doesn’t look at all like someone who can barely swing a sword.”

Et tu, Tiamat?

“He had a knack for fashion back in the Dragon Realm, too. Didn’t expect that, did you?”

“Weirdo.”

In the midst of the jeering, Baze alone refrained from any comments, but I figured that was only because he lacked interest. He was chewing on some skewers he had bought along the way.

“The military uniform is the water main of all men’s fashion. Utility is the superior style.”

Back in Japan, I had just incorporated a little military element into my outfit to make it a lot more fashionable. Now I simply did the same with adventurer gear. I included a few adventurer items in my ordinary street clothes, like a leather vest and a dagger on my belt. Dressing like some master adventurer would never have suited me well, anyway.

“You don’t look trained, but there’s no flaw in your outfit. It exudes this quiet confidence. Anyone would take you for a skilled adventurer.”

“Just on the outside,” I chuckled at Ruey’s compliment.

I wasn’t a master in disguise, unfortunately. With no surprise factor or trick up my sleeve, I was a fresh rookie. With just one movement in combat I’d be found out.

“Negotiations require a little visual aid. In that sense, our battle has already begun,” Tiamat said.

Not being underestimated was pretty important. The dialogue wouldn’t even begin if he disregards us as some peasants or something. That’s why we had Leon buy an outfit too. Nothing over the top, but just a simple, clean outfit. Since Tiamat and Baze were transformed with a spell, they didn’t need any new clothes.

“I feel like we should bring something, but there’s nothing we can buy that we could gift to the king.”

We could actually be considered disrespectful for bringing anything unworthy. I find it often ignored in fantasy pieces, but disrespecting royalty was a serious crime. One punishable by death. I mean, if an office worker disrespected the owner of the company in Japan, he’d get fired. Same kind of thing.

I recalled a work of fiction where an entire clan was massacred because one of them committed the disrespect of not kneeling before the king, enraging him. But, even in modern-day Japan, you didn’t really have a place in society if you couldn’t show etiquette when it mattered.

“Mm. Etiquette is also said to be a mask that covers one’s true emotions. Putting on a different persona to match the situation is a skill required of all adults in human society. I am thou, and thou art I.”

“Per...”

I began to strike a peculiar pose as Tiamat finished. I could have used some funky jazz in the background.

“Is that really how an adult should act in Japan?”

Leon was watching me with a shade of pity.

10.

The next morning, our party visited the castle. It was as large as the castle in Azur, with stereotypically medieval-fantasy architecture. Much more impressive than the melon castle in Yubari.

“My name is Ruey, son of Earl Agamemnon. I am here to speak to His Majesty.”

The earl’s heir declared our intention, loud and clear. Of course, I was sure that the guards were already aware.

With a courteous bow, a soldier invited us five into the castle. I was a little jumpy because I had already done the screw up of being killed in a castle before. That was something I hadn’t really gotten over.

Determined to not take any food or drink they would serve no matter how warm their welcome, I walked down the large corridor with my party. The aforementioned soldiers were leading us, followed by Ruey, then Tiamat and I side by side, with Leon and Baze in the rear.

I chalked up the lifelessness that loomed around the extravagant décor to the castle being a public building. The clerk’s office was the same, too. Some female coworkers had attempted to breathe a little life into the place by decorating the counters with flowers and such,

but it only changed the atmosphere a little. People never used that kind of facility unless they had to. No one goes to the city clerk's office just to hang out. We the workers do want to make it inviting for anyone with a problem that needs solving, but we can't really get rid of that formal atmosphere.

Our party eventually arrived at a large door, almost double the size of that in Leon's castle. We were in the royal palace, after all. I didn't really understand the need to enlarge doors, but perhaps they used every little thing to display their authority and class. The doors slowly opened.

"The arrival of Sir Eiji, Master Hermit!"

A clear voice that most likely belonged to a ceremonial guard rang out in the room. Most countries had one of those, and they just knew how to project.

Straightening my back, I walked forward along the red carpet. With just my eyes, I observed the room without moving my face. Scholarly and military advisors were aligned on either side. Ruey alone detached from our party to line up alongside the military advisors. He was a citizen of this country, after all.

Lyser, the current king of Noura, sat on the throne atop a set of stairs. I stopped about thirty steps away from him; I had Tiamat to my left and Leon and Baze behind me.

We didn't kneel. Since we were not citizens of the kingdom of Noura, we did not greet him as our king. In fact, we couldn't afford to give off any impression that we served any one country in particular, so our whole party was left just standing there.

"Thank you for granting us an audience, King Lyser."

"Thank you for traveling so far to see me, Sir Eiji, Master Hermit."

The king responded with a polite greeting, albeit still seated. Etiquette was paramount at times like these. No one's pride was at risk from following said etiquette here, and being rude would not have benefited either of us. I believe that any adult has to make choices based on practicality over emotions to a certain degree.

"I can't thank you enough for your time, Your Majesty."

"No need. I have been wanting to see you. I've heard much about your heroism in Mostail."

"Not a story worthy of your time, I'm sure."

We exchanged smiles. Just some pleasantries.

"Now, I've heard that you have a plan to save Noura."

"I wouldn't dare claim that much. I only want to stop the war."

"Really...?"

"I have heard about the state of war from Earl Agamemnon and Lord Ruey."

"Will you vanquish the monster army for us?"

“Far from it. That would only repeat history, Your Majesty.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“We want to meet with the Demon Lord and suggest that they emigrate to somewhere far away from human civilization.”

“What an idea!”

The king looked surprised. In reality, of course, we had already met with the Demon Lord and gotten her to agree. The Demon Lord was right behind me, in fact! We didn’t have to bother the king with that knowledge, though.

“At the end of the day, I believe that the war is caused by the close proximity of both species. If each side lived far away from each other without the need to interact, there would be no cause for tension.”

“Indeed, that is true,” the king laughed.

This logic stands in modern-day Earth, too. There are countries mired in poverty, torn apart by war, and even suffocated by dictators. But will Japan ever give enough support to these countries to the point of endangering its own state?

I’m sure there are some people who spend all of their money in support of them. Many people donate some portion of their income to these causes. I consider them admirable and outstanding, but they are only allowed to do so as individuals. It was a different story if Japan were to starve as a whole from saving other countries.

As a country, Japan has the obligation to serve its people to the best of its ability. Then, if there is any left to go around, our resources can be used to help other countries. This isn’t exactly the most virtuous way of thinking, but I think we’ve lost sight of what’s important when foreign workers are treated so well that there are no jobs left for Japanese citizens.

King Lyser had to think like that too, putting the kingdom of Noura and its people above all else. Truth be told, even if other countries were to fight monsters and wear themselves out, it was all a fire across the river. By no means was this mindset inappropriate. He had an obligation to protect his country and people.

“No good can come from war, especially when it’s within your borders.”

“Absolutely. If the monsters really left Noura altogether, that would be the best scenario we could hope for.”

Even if Noura had decided to fight the monsters and win, they would not earn a single bronze coin in reparations nor a single square meter of new land. It would only cost them money and lives. If the king was the kind of person that didn’t find that futile, I would have given up on this negotiation. Luckily, King Lyser was not.

“But, Sir Eiji. Is that really possible?”

Now, our conversation was about to get technical. It was written on the king's face that he wouldn't accept 'it's not impossible' as an answer.

"Of course, Your Majesty," I answered with quiet confidence. We had already succeeded, after all.

"I will take care of convincing the Demon Lord. The only thing is, if your army attacks the monsters during their emigration, things are going to escalate beyond my control."

This was something I had to hammer in, as many times as it took. The monsters weren't pacifists, of course. If attacked, they would retaliate. If retaliated, humans would attack again. They would plunge straight back into war. My proposal, in short, was for the king to have the travel road vacated for the monster's mass emigration.

"...I understand."

The king agreed to it after a long pause. He must have considered the consequences of freezing the nation's travel roads, albeit for a short period. Of course he did. At the end of the day, this was a choice between continuing to wage war against the monsters and having them gone in exchange for temporary inconvenience.

"Thank you for wisdom, Your Majesty."

"Please. I should be the one thanking you, Master Hermit. You'll save us unnecessary bloodshed."

"Peace is the supreme victory."

"Indeed. Now, how long should I keep the travel roads clear? There will be some difficulty in doing so for too long."

"I will send a messenger once the monster army is ready to emigrate. I think it would take them less than ten days from that point to leave the country."

With that, I turned around to Baze. I was counting on his speed to deliver the message. With a nod, Baze changed his form, and a silver Fenrir appeared in the royal hall.

"Understood," he said, with a voice that boomed through the pit of my stomach.

"Oh... Oh... Star Breaker..."

King Lyser wobbled off of his throne and approached him to touch his silver fur. As if they were struck, his advisors all knelt at once. The scene was practically out of some religious painting.

Hold on. Lord Baze was definitely more respected than I was! That babysitter.

And so, we had managed to garner King Lyser's support. We had completed the first step, and things were about to get difficult as we had to worry about more practical things.

"Planning the travel route, securing food, picking out campsites..."

There are countless things to worry about.”

“Yep,” I agreed with Tiamat.

Just because the people at the top decided to do something, it didn’t mean that the execution would go smoothly. Making a decision was easy, just like giving the order to do it. Most people in the workforce, including little bureaucrats like me, spent their days trying to clean up the mess of decisions made by those above us. Maybe once in my life I’ll get to say, “Do it yourself, then.”

“First, we return to Gannes,” Leon said.

It was so obvious that Tiamat and I couldn’t help but stare at each other for a moment. We couldn’t give any directions without going back to home base. Even I didn’t expect to make any stops and have some fun on the way home.

“...If I were the god of this world...”

The highschooler Demon Lord looked just a little worried.

“I’d go for the head now. That eliminates the path for peace.”

Once the Demon Lord and the Hermits returned to Gannes, the emigration would officially start. Before that, sabotaging our plan was easy. Kill Leon. Without a leader, the monster army would attack the humans, enraged, plunging this country into war and bloodshed.

“So our journey back is going to be super dangerous...?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, I thought.”

“Holy cow, I didn’t think of that!”

I clasped my head in my hands. That’s right! If I or Leon were to die before we got there, our plan would be done for!

“...Weirdo.”

The little Demon Lord went from worried to exasperated.

“Stop being so pathetic in front of a highschooler.” Tiamat shrugged.

Hold on. I swear the thought had never crossed her mind, either. Why did she have to make it look like it was all my fault? In any case, we had to be prepared for anything during our seven-day journey from the capital back to Gannes.

“No one will put a finger on you while I still breathe, Eiji. Worry not.”

“That makes me feel a lot better, Tia, but I wish I was the one saying it to you.”

I chuckled at my confident dragon princess. Another journey began.

Special Side Story: The Foodie of the Campsite

This isn't something that needs reiterating now, but Eiji had very little household skills. In fact, he had almost never performed any chores around the house. It would have been some miracle if he ended up with those skills without any practice. It was so bad that the first time he washed his own underwear was in this fantasy world.

At the rate he was going, he was headed straight towards the life of a useless husband. Who could say if it was to his benefit that he was met with this (albeit very peculiar) opportunity to do chores for himself?

"I swear I'll help with laundry and cleaning the tub when we're back in Japan. I didn't know it was this much work," Eiji said, after spending the day doing laundry in a small stream.

"Mm. That's a great promise, but we have washing machines that take care of all of that. All humans have to do is hang them up to dry, but we've already invented a machine for that too."

As usual, Tiamat countered his determination. Still, Eiji was now washing his own dirty laundry, but cooking was another story. They didn't have the convenience of modern-day cooking equipment, and they didn't acquire any food prepped to cook. Of course there was no stove or electric appliances of any kind. For someone so out of touch with the kitchen that he didn't know that rice could be cooked in a pot (and not just in a rice cooker), outdoor cooking was an impossible task.

As a result, Ruey was the one tasked with cooking for the party. They couldn't very well expect Baze or Hieronymus to cook, and even Tiamat didn't know how to pluck birds or anything.

Even though Ruey was heir to the earl, he was also a soldier. He could do some campsite cooking. However, making the food look and taste good was another story entirely. Ruey could make meals that seemed like it wouldn't kill you.

That all changed when Cielz joined the party, though. This dark elf from the monster army was by no means an ally to the rest of the party; at best, she was temporarily neutral. The fact that she still volunteered to cook for the party was a testament to the miserable state of their meals beforehand.

She caught wild birds with magic, discerned edible vegetation,

and made stir-fries and soups. None of her dishes were particularly ornate, nor did she use any basic seasoning other than salt. Still, Eiji gladly ate those dishes. In fact, he devoured them.

Who could have blamed him? Compared to rock-hard loaves of bread and soup made from nothing but jerked meat and water, these dishes were heavenly. The meat was properly treated and the vegetables and mushrooms cleaned. As the Hermit sighed after the first satisfying meal in a long time, Cielz proudly scoffed.

“What kind of garbage have you been eating, Hermit?”

“We’re traveling. Of course we cut back on food.”

Ruey snarled back. He never enjoyed being the cook; he was just their best option previously. But seeing the dark elf look so triumphant immediately ticked him off.

“I didn’t cut into your food supply, did I? I gathered all of the ingredients here,” Cielz retaliated.

These two did not get along. Of course, it was hard to expect a human and a dark elf to get along. It wasn’t an overstatement to say that they were each other’s ultimate nemesis.

“Grr!”

Ruey was defeated.

“Hmph!”

Cielz was grinning.

“Sir Eiji! I’ll cook tomorrow!”

Where were they headed with this?

Hardly breathing, he blended into the scenery, as if he had become one with the forest. He was eyeing a young doe, obviously licking salt off of a rock. He drew a single arrow from his back, and carefully loaded it. He didn’t take a second arrow. His father had taught him that a hunter would become complacent knowing that he had another shot. As if he had no arrows left on his back, he focused on the one he loaded. He pulled back his bow. The doe looked up, picking up on his intention to kill, then made a run for it.

“Too late.”

The loosed arrow drew a straight arc in the air and sunk into the doe’s neck. Ruey’s lips formed a grin as the doe collapsed. It had only taken one shot. He ran to his game and grabbed it by the front legs to carry it on his back. This was going to be quite the feast. A much better one than the bird that monster had shot.

“Heh heh heh. I am of much better use to Sir Eiji than she ever will be.”

A grin of victory.

But as soon as he returned to the campsite, Cielz scolded him.

“Did you drain its blood?”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean, ‘huh?’ You have to drain its blood while the heart is still beating or it’ll ruin the taste.”

Shrugging off the confused Ruey, the dark elf began swiftly treating the game with the aid of Baze and Hieronymus. They moved to the river bank and hung the doe by its hind legs on a tree before slitting its throat. Her delicate, dark hands cleanly skinned the hide from the doe’s centerline and folded it up.

“What is she doing, Lady Tiamat?” Ruey asked the beautiful dragon princess.

Shaking her silver locks, the beauty of the century answered him.

“Since you’re not a hunter, you had no way of knowing this. Beasts can’t be killed and eaten without a process. Unless you’re Baze or Hieronymus.”

Naturally. Despite their current human forms, they were a Fenrir and Cait Sith.

“I see...”

“They need to be drained of blood, skinned, taken apart, and treated. I didn’t expect her to use a wind spell, though. That way no one has to dirty their hands with blood.”

While Tiamat watched with curiosity, Eiji was looking in a slightly different direction. He didn’t seem to be handling this kind of scene very well. Of course, not many people enjoy watching animals being taken apart.

“Deer aren’t usually fatty, but the ones around here are pretty good. Let’s roast it,” Cielz said, satisfied by her work.

“I can do the cooking today...”

“And boil it again?”

“Grr...”

Ruey’s interjection was immediately shot down by the truth. Moreover, he was excited by the prospect of roasting the meat. As the heir to the earl imagined skewering and roasting the deer on an open fire, watching fat drip down and erupt in the flame, his stomach growled, echoing into the woods.





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